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Hispanic Graduates' Perspectives on Experiences Contributing to Successful Community College Degree Completion

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Walden University
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Abstract

Hispanic Graduates' Perspectives on Experiences Contributing to Successful Community

College Degree Completion

by

Catherine Aguilar-Morgan

MS, New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, 1981

BS, New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, 1979

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Education

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Abstract

While the Hispanic population is the fastest-growing in both the United States and higher education enrollment, the gap in degree attainment for Hispanic students is not closing at the same rate. Degree completion provides Hispanics the opportunity to secure jobs that require skills learned in higher education and, in turn, can increase their socioeconomic status. Hispanic graduates' perspectives on the experiences that contributed to community college degree completion is the focus of this basic qualitative study. Tinto's theory of student departure was used for the conceptual framework. The two research questions that guided the study were what community college experiences Hispanic graduates believe supported their degree completions and what experiences outside the community college Hispanic graduates believe contributed to degree completion. A basic qualitative study was used to gather data directly from a sample consisting of 10 participants who had completed an associate degree within the last year and who self-identified as Hispanic. Transcripts were analyzed using open coding to determine common themes. Six themes resulted from data analysis: sustained availability of faculty and advisors and staff, access to community college resources, value of education, family, intrinsic motivation and organization, and networking. By identifying experiences that contributed to Hispanic graduates' community college degree completions, results of this study may help community college leaders and faculty address policy and programs to effect positive social change through increased Hispanic college completion and improved employment opportunities.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my family and colleagues. Your support and encouragement greatly helped me complete this academic achievement, my long-desired goal. Thank you to my children, parents, my doctoral chair and committee, and my co-workers. This work would have been much more difficult without you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

As higher education becomes more accessible, leaders at these institutions are concerned with retention and completion of all students. As the Hispanic population is the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), Hispanic enrollment in higher education is increasing (Grawe, 2018). However, the equity gap in degree completion has not closed. Kirk and Watt (2018) described the Hispanic population as the fastest growing minority population in the United States, and with this increase there will be a need for the Hispanic population to fill vacancies in the workforce. Although the Hispanic population is growing, completion of higher education is not growing at the same rate. According to 2016 National Center for Educational Statistics data with a cohort year 2010, 16% of Hispanic community college students completed an associate degree within 3 years compared to 22% of White students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Enrollment in the community colleges for the cohort was 35% White and 49% Hispanic (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Research studies have been conducted relating institutional support and its impact on student retention (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017; Mertes, 2015; Murphy & Murphy, 2018), but few research studies have been conducted where students are surveyed to determine which mechanisms provided the support needed to complete a degree or certificate. The potential social implications of this qualitative research study could include an increase in Hispanic higher education completion with a potential increase in socioeconomic status, improved financial and job stability, and better career opportunities. Also, possible would

be the likelihood of reporting health to be very good or excellent, increasing the likelihood of being happy, and increasing the nation's economic security and competitiveness (Schak et al., 2019; Trostel, 2015).

In this chapter, I provide a brief background on what is known of student persistence to completion. I include the research problem as well as evidence that the problem is current, relevant, and significant. I further identify a gap in the research, which this study is designed to address. The purpose of the study and research questions are provided along with the conceptual framework. I then describe the nature of the study and provide corresponding definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance.

Background

Higher education institutions, both 2- and 4-year, have conducted research studies regarding student retention and persistence. Student persistence to completion is essential in increasing students' socioeconomic status, especially as the population of the United States is moving toward becoming a more technological society. The skills obtained in higher education will be required to compete in this more technological society (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Ma & Baum, 2016). Although there have been significant studies of persistence and retention in college, a major aspect not addressed in the data is the focus on obtaining data directly from Hispanic students. This is important because the Hispanic population, both nationally and in higher education, is increasing at a rate greater than that for other ethnicities (Grawe, 2018). Excelencia in Education's (2018)

data showed that 51% of Hispanic students entering higher education begin at the community college, higher than Black students at 48%, Asians at 38%, and Whites at 36%. After 6 years, only 18% of the Hispanic students in this data set completed a degree at a 2-year college (Excelencia in Education, 2018). Students entering higher education and not completing a degree or certificate will leave higher education in a worse financial state than when they started with an accompanying loss of wages that could have been earned while in college as well as possible student debt (Ma & Baum, 2016).

Research studies from the literature review indicated a gap in data gathered directly from Hispanic students. Obtaining information directly from Hispanic students will help increase understanding of the experiences to which Hispanic students attribute successful degree completion at a community college. Tinto (2017) and Tovar (2015) gathered data and reported institutional findings on Hispanic students' retention and completion. Both described students' interaction with institutional agents and participation in support programs as strong components in Hispanic students' degree completion; however, the data were not gathered from the Hispanic students themselves. Faculty-student interactions were described by Tinto (2012) as a factor in student completions; however, Tinto began this research at 4-year universities and did not disaggregate and analyze data with respect to ethnicity and culture. My research study will gather data that focuses on Hispanic graduates' perspective as to the critical nature of self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and relevance and expectations. The research will

provide another lens as to what experiences contributed to Hispanic students' persistence to completions.

Student persistence to completion is essential in closing the completion gap for Hispanic students; further, it is important to the students as a way to increase their socioeconomic status, job stability, and competitive wages (Schak et al., 2019). These developments are often followed by substantial benefits to the rest of society, such as increased philanthropic contributions and participation and leadership in school, community, service, and civics is above the average (Trostel, 2015). Graw (2018) reported an increase in socioeconomic status due to increased wages when students complete a higher education program. According to Velez (2014), students who do not complete a degree or certificate may experience negative outcomes such as loss of workforce experience, student loan debt, and no increase in wages. Velez also reported that degree completion is less than 25% for minority and low-income students. By determining experiences that support Hispanic students' degree completion, ways can be provided to improve the Hispanic population's socioeconomic status through this degree completion.

Hispanic families understand the importance of completing a degree or certificate and therefore provide their support to students. This support may typically be more emotional than financial in nature (Vega, 2016). Many Hispanic students' parents or family members do not have a higher education degree or experience but understand the value of higher education and therefore encourage the students toward higher education

(Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). My research study will help to reveal the reasons why students persist to completion, with a focus on Hispanic graduates. Community colleges may be able to use the results of this study as a basis to increase Hispanic student degree completions, which, in turn, could contribute to improving the lives of Hispanic families and communities.

Excelencia in Education (2018) reported that many institutions are guided by limited and inaccurate profiles of Hispanics. To assist institutions, the publication summarized proposals aimed at increasing Hispanic degree attainment. One of the proposals is to find new ways to improve serving Hispanic students, to better understand their needs and deficiencies, and to develop ways to meet these needs. My study may contribute to understanding the needs of Hispanic students and may help to find ways to meet those needs.

Problem Statement

The Hispanic population is the fastest growing population in the United States, not only nationally but within the higher education system (Grawe, 2018). Even with the increased number of Hispanic students entering the higher education system, Hispanic students' completion rates have not risen at comparable rates (NCES, 2016) and are in fact the lowest among all ethnic groups (Samuel & Scott, 2014). Although there are several studies that quantified the rankings of Hispanic students in higher education (Graw, 2018; Ma & Baum, 2016; Schak et al., 2019; Serrano, 2017) as well as those that analyzed data and conducted observations (Covarrubias et al., 2018; Goldsmith &

Kurpius, 2018; Pina-Watson et al., 2015), little research has highlighted Hispanic students' perspectives regarding the reasons for successful degree completion. Research studies have provided information about institutional practices regarding Hispanic student retention and completion from the administration's or observers' point of view (Museus et al., 2016; Titsworth et al., 2015). Other researchers have gathered data directly from the students but only examined enrollment and persistence, not completion (Bergman et al., 2014; Mertes, 2015; Vega, 2016). Only by understanding Hispanic students' experiences that contributed to successful degree completions can community college leaders proactively assist and guide students toward degree completion. It is important to Hispanic students, higher education administrators, faculty, and staff for students to complete a program. However, higher education administrators, faculty, and staff may not be sure how best to support Hispanic students. Through interviews with Hispanic graduates who have successfully completed community college, educators can understand what factors and experiences are most beneficial in supporting students in their persistence to completion.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify which experiences Hispanic graduates cite as contributing to successful degree completion at a community college. Research studies have identified factors that contribute to retention and completion, but it is the self-reporting of Hispanic graduates that is the research gap in these studies. I was interested in exploring what information Hispanic graduates provide as an insight into

what aided their persistence to completion. Therefore, this basic qualitative study focused on the students' point of view rather than observations or data gathered through quantitative means.

Research Questions

1. What community college experiences do Hispanic recent graduates perceive contributed to their degree completions?
2. What experiences outside the community college do Hispanic recent graduates perceive contributed to their degree completions?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Tinto's (1987) theory of student departure, which indicated that reasons for student departure prior to degree or certificate completion were related to students' personal characteristics and interactions that occurred at institutions of higher education. Tinto (2017) described aspects of students' persistence and completion, which include a sense of belonging as well as institutional support. These aspects were the key focus of this study. Tinto (1993) defined students' personal characteristics as attributes. These characteristics are family background, self-efficacy, and prior schooling. Flink (2018) described the Hispanic higher education population as an understudied population and therefore suggested that more information is needed to understand the poor trend of Hispanic retention and completion rates. This qualitative study provides student insight regarding a sense of belonging, institutional support, engagement, and persistence to completion. Using Tinto's theory as a conceptual

foundation, this research study addresses factors that Hispanic graduates identify as providing incentive, motivation, and support to complete a degree. The focus was on the graduates' point of view regarding experiences contributing to successful degree completion.

Nature of the Study

The research design was a basic qualitative research study with the goal of identifying the experiences to which Hispanic graduates attribute successful degree completion at a community college. Patton (2015) described qualitative methods as useful in practical problem-solving and real-world decision-making, whereas Merriam (2009) indicated that a basic qualitative approach is used to answer questions with interviews as a source of data. Qualitative inquiry is personal, and it provides data that researchers seek to determine how the participants view their experiences. Further, it is useful to discover patterns that are hidden in the details (Patton, 2015). I used open-ended interview questions to interview 10 recent graduates. I performed open coding of the interviews to derive emergent themes and patterns. I reviewed the summary, coded the data, and looked for patterns and themes. I predicted that the results would provide answers to my research questions.

Definitions

Hispanic or Latino: Refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race (U.S. Census, 2018).

Recent graduates: Graduates who have completed community college within the last year.

Persistence: For the purpose of the study, persistence refers to students who return to college at any institution to continue their education (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018).

Retention: For the purpose of this study, retention refers to the students who continue to be enrolled at the same institution. (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018).

Student engagement: Refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they must learn and progress in their education (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2016). Axelson and Flick (2011) defined student engagement as how interested or involved students are in their learning and how connected they are to their institution and to each other.

Assumptions

This study was developed to understand to which experiences Hispanic graduates attribute their community college completions. It was assumed that the Hispanic graduates would be open and honest during the interview process. It was also assumed that the interview questions would allow the participants to express their experiences and perceptions. By assuring the participants that all information would remain confidential,

the assumption was that participants would be more open, willing to detail their background and experiences.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the research included Hispanic graduates who had graduated with an associate degree from community college within the last year. The research location is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) community college, with 73% of the student population self-identifying as Hispanic. This HSI is located in the southwestern part of the United States. The research focused on experiences to which Hispanic graduates attributed their degree completions. A delimitation of the study was interviewing only the Hispanic graduates who had agreed to participate in the study as it is the responses of these graduates that will provide representative data for Hispanic graduates. An additional delimitation of the study is that interviews are of community college graduates and not graduates of 4-year institutions. One of the major differences in students entering 4-year institutions versus community college is that community colleges have open enrollment, whereas many 4-year institutions have more exacting entrance requirements. This is one reason community colleges enroll a majority of students of color (Serrano, 2017). With that major difference, Hispanic graduates may cite different experiences as reasons for completions at community colleges.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was that I planned to collect data from participants who all attended the same community college. Although a larger cross-section of

community colleges might permit data collection from more participants in different locations, the selected institution is a typical community college that offers a variety of certificates and degrees but is also rich in its diversity as an HSI. Another limitation of this study was potential bias that may stem from my Hispanic background, which may be similar to that of the Hispanic graduates I will be interviewing. I will address this potential limitation by ensuring that the participants are not my students. Further, I will be attentive to the fact that their backgrounds and experiences may be different than those of my students. A third limitation is my limited experience as a researcher. To address this limitation, I will refer to Patton's (2015) guidelines for qualitative research and to my training as a doctoral student. Finally, I will address a potential bias of trying to solicit expected responses by showing empathy and understanding while allowing the graduates' voices to be heard.

Significance

The focus of this study was to identify experiences that can contribute to Hispanic student persistence to completion at community colleges. With the Hispanic population being one of the fastest growing populations yet the socioeconomic status of the Hispanic population not rising as quickly, the question becomes which experiences can be provided so that more Hispanic students can complete higher education. By identifying factors and experiences, through the views of Hispanic graduates, that lead to community college completion, changes can be implemented with the goal of increasing completion rates.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided a brief background on the low Hispanic student completion rates in higher education as well as the gap in the knowledge of factors that contribute to students' completion. Next, in the problem statement I described the growing Hispanic population and increase in Hispanic higher education enrollment that is not accompanied by a corresponding increase in completion rates as evidence supporting the problem statement. I stated the purpose of the study: to define experiences to which Hispanic graduates attribute their persistence to completion. I discussed the conceptual framework, providing a basis for the research study. Finally, I addressed the nature of the study, corresponding definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance.

In Chapter 2, I will provide a comprehensive review of the literature and further describe the gap in the research. I will describe Tinto's conceptual framework of self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and relevance and expectation, which is used as a basis to develop the research study. I will include a comprehensive literature review related to student retention, engagement, and completion. I will also identify the gap in the existing research which this study will address by allowing Hispanic graduates to define which experiences they attribute to degree completion. Finally, I will detail how this research study may help close the gap.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to identify Hispanic graduates' perspectives on experiences that contributed to successful community college degree completion. Although longitudinal data show that Hispanic students are enrolling in higher education at increased rates, completion rates have not increased proportionally (NCES, 2016) and in fact are the lowest among all ethnic groups (Samuel & Scott, 2014). Hispanic students understand the need for program completion in order to increase their socioeconomic standing, which is defined as not only income-related but also education-related (Schak et al., 2019; Trostel, 2015). However, community college leaders do not have a clear understanding of what Hispanic students need to be retained and motivated to persist to completion. With the increase in Hispanic college enrollment, a corresponding increase in completions has not been seen. This qualitative study will help close the gap by gathering data directly from Hispanic graduates regarding the experiences that led to retention and completion of their degree. By exploring factors to which Hispanic graduates attribute their community college completions, I may be able to describe interventions that can potentially assist in attaining higher Hispanic completion rates.

Hispanics make up the second largest racial and ethnic group in the United States but have the lowest degree attainment (Schak et al., 2019). Schak et al. (2019) found that Hispanic students encounter a host of barriers to degree completion, whether at the community college or 4-year institution level. Researchers have conducted studies to determine barriers as well as implementation of methods used in an attempt to assist in

overcoming the barriers. I conducted my study to focus on experiences the Hispanic graduates themselves cite as contributing to successful degree completion. Research studies have provided information about student retention and persistence, but the data gathered are predominately from faculty and administrators' point of view (Bergman et al., 2014; Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016; Murphy & Murphy, 2018).

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 continues with a description of the search strategies I used to find relevant literature pertaining to students' success in higher education with a focus on, but not limited to, Hispanic students. Chapter 2 then continues with Tinto's student integration conceptual framework. Tinto launched his initial research study in 1993. His studies, observations, and analysis provided the basic concepts for my proposed research study.

One purpose of the literature review was to analyze research on institutional practices used to increase student retention and completion. In reviewing the research studies, I noted that most of the studies used institutional data or summarized and reviewed research data but did not report the voice of the students, suggesting a gap in the research. After analyzing the research studies, I identified research on three key strategies used in community colleges: (a) to increase self-efficacy, (b) to form a sense of belonging, and (c) to create relevance and expectation within the institution. In the majority of research studies, the data from the students were not collected at the community college level, where the majority of Hispanic students enter higher education (Excelencia in Education, 2018), but rather from 4-year institutions.

Literature Search Strategy

I conducted this literature review using the following databases: ERIC, Education Source databases, EBSCO, Education Source, Sage Premier, Academic Search Complete, SocINDEX, and Google Scholar. I began with the basic search terms of *Hispanic*, *community college*, and *completions*. Search terms were revised to include *Hispanic*, *latin**, *chican**, *Mexican American*, *graduat**, *completion*, *success**, *achievem**, *motivate**, *persistence*, and *incentiv**, *higher education*, *support*, *retention or graduation*, *achievement motivation*, *mentor**, and *community college*, using a variety of combinations of the terms. In Google Scholar, the terms used were *Hispanic students' graduation rates* and *what Hispanic students need to complete college*. After obtaining articles using the previously mentioned terms, keywords from the articles were used to expand the search. Keywords included *persistence*, *engagement*, *first-generation students*, *academic self-concepts*, *classroom environment*, *resiliency*, and *locus of control*. Population and completion data were obtained from government websites, Complete College America, educational websites, and recently published books. When reviewing relevant and applicable research articles more than 5 years old, I employed a Google Scholar search to find journal articles that cited the older article to find more recent research.

Conceptual Framework

In this section, I describe Tinto's conceptual framework and outline aspects of Tinto's ideas relating to student retention, persistence, and completion. Tinto's (1993,

2012, 2017) models address factors that affect students' retention and persistence to completion in both community college and 4-year universities. What Tinto did not address are factors that might directly affect minority students' persistence and completion. Although Tinto's models address retention and persistence, the initial data that Tinto discussed came from institutional quantitative studies on student retention and persistence; the students were typically enrolled in residential universities and were of majority background (Tinto, 2006). Tinto's later studies began focusing on the subset of students in nonresidential settings and 2-year institutions as well as the factors that largely impact these students' retention and persistence (Tinto, 2006). Tinto's concepts are the foundation for my conceptual framework and are comprised of three basic components: self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and relevance. These components are further described below.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is described as students' belief that they can succeed (Tinto, 2017). Self-efficacy increases when students experience success; not only does their self-efficacy increase, but also their locus of control moves from external to internal (Tinto, 2017). Tinto's (2012) framework for self-efficacy and student success has its foundational base in Bandura's social cognitive theory. Bandura's (1977) discussion addressing one aspect of self-efficacy, performance-based efficacy, is that students' confidence in their capabilities increases through their behavioral accomplishments, which will in turn reduce their fear of failure. Bandura further concluded that as self-

efficacy increases, students who experience failure with a task will persist and overcome that failure. Tinto (2012) used Bandura's social cognitive theory to develop aspects of students' self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is learned, not inherited (Tinto, 2017); it is learned from students' interaction with others and through the experiences they have encountered.

Support is crucial to increase students' self-efficacy. Tinto (2012) described the importance of academic support in the first year of college, as students who succeed in their first year are more likely to persist to degree completion. Students' self-efficacy decreases when the students do not have the skills to address problems that arise and therefore experience failure at academic tasks. To circumvent academic failure and, in turn, support the increase of self-efficacy, Tinto (2017) recommended institutions implement front-loaded academic support to develop students' success with task and to increase self-efficacy. It is the responsibility of the institution's administration and faculty to reach out and support the students, Tinto (2017) indicated, since many students view it as a sign of weakness to seek help. Reluctance to seek help is particularly true of Hispanic students, especially Hispanic male students who relate seeking help to reducing "machismo" and fear of failure (Ponjuan & Hernandez, 2016).

Academic support programs that encourage students while they are completing tasks and guide students through complex tasks provide students with feelings of competence and increased self-efficacy (Tinto, 2012). Enhancing the feeling of competence is critical in increasing self-efficacy; as a result, student retention and

persistence to completion are more likely to occur (Tinto, 2017). Tinto (2017) reported that academic support that leads to self-efficacy and validation of success is critically important for first-generation and minority students, including Hispanic students. First-generation students are more likely to attend a community college (48%) and those first-generation learners are predominantly non-White students from low-income backgrounds (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). As students succeed, their self-efficacy increases, stress is reduced, and the likelihood of retention and perseverance increases (Tinto, 2012).

Sense of Belonging

Tinto (2012) stressed the importance of students feeling a sense of belonging in order to be retained and persist to completion. Tinto (2012) described factors that form a student's sense of belonging, including involvement or engagement with faculty and other students. Involvement and engagement include group work in the classroom, student study groups, and positive interactions with faculty (Tinto, 2012). Students can academically engage through group work and group tutoring sessions. Many students take the academic engagement to a social environment, which strengthens the sense of belonging at the institution (Tinto, 2017). Tinto (2012) documented the importance of students' sense of belonging but did not account for the relevance and responsiveness to diverse student backgrounds (Museus et al., 2016).

Faculty-student interaction is another form of involvement or engagement. Tinto (2012) reported that first-generation students are reticent to seek assistance from faculty

members as faculty members may seem unapproachable. In Tinto's study, the students were hesitant to meet with faculty members outside the classroom and ask questions inside the classroom; however, Tinto (2017) indicated that the hesitancy can be reduced through increased interaction, not only with faculty but also with fellow students. An interesting aspect of faculty-student interaction, Tinto (2012) found that students were more inclined to interact with faculty who were ethnically like them or understood their culture. Further, Tinto's (2012) research study found that students who met with faculty members often did better academically, as students who engaged with faculty both inside and outside the classroom were more successful academically, with an accompanying increase in retention. Faculty who are approachable will create an atmosphere where students become engaged in classwork and in the institution. These students form a sense of belonging (Tinto, 2017).

Involvement can be increased when faculty encourage student interaction through learning environments, a type of supplemental instruction, giving students and faculty a venue to establish rapport and further enhance student academic skills (Tinto, 2012). Learning environments that provide opportunities to assist with coursework and to practice skills enhance students' self-efficacy, increase students sense of belonging, and lead to increased retention and persistence (Tinto, 2012). Peer mentoring and learning environments, in general, create a relationship where students can ask questions without a sense of embarrassment (Tinto, 2012). Tinto (1993) reported that students' sense of

belonging leads to the long-term goal of persisting to degree attainment. It is that sense of belonging that can encourage a student to be retained and complete a degree.

Even with academic support through faculty and student interaction, some students still leave college without completing a degree. Tinto (1993) researched common reasons students provided for leaving: adjustment, academic difficulty, incongruence, and isolation. Adjustment is students' ability to adapt to the new world of higher education (Tinto, 1993). The adjustments that students need to make are forming new peer groups and developing strategies to meet more challenging social and intellectual demands (Tinto, 1993). Moving from high school to college, Tinto (2012) reported, is a difficult adjustment for many students. Leaving the established peer groups and academic requirements are big adjustments for entering freshmen, and even more so for first-generation and minority students (Tinto, 1993). It is through the challenging intellectual demands that students encounter academic difficulty. Students who are from disadvantaged and/or minority backgrounds are more likely to encounter problems with adjustments to the higher education environment and with academic difficulty. They are therefore more likely to leave higher education (Tinto, 1993). Another challenge for students is learning how to apply previously learned academic skills to the present situation and understanding the relevancy to issues that concern them (Tinto, 2017).

Incongruence, as defined by Tinto (1993), is a mismatch between the student and the institution. The mismatch, Tinto explained, is usually perceived by the student and comes in the form of mismatch of skills, interests, and needs of the individual. Tinto

indicated that students will often withdraw from the institution before perceived academic failure or dismissal occurs; the student may transfer to another institution where the student perceives a better match. Tinto further described isolation as students' insufficient contact through social and academic interaction. Students who have not made a significant connection to someone on campus frequently leave higher education because they feel isolated. That someone on campus can be a student, faculty, or staff member. For first-generation and minority students, the ability to ask questions so they can form an understanding of how to navigate college is critical to retention and completion (Tinto, 2012). Faculty-student interaction, both inside and outside the classroom, is a common way to overcome a student's feeling of isolation. Tinto (1993) reported that faculty-student interaction is more important than student-student interaction and will play a larger role in student retention.

Relevance and Expectation

Students enter the higher education system with a goal of completing a degree or certificate (Tinto, 2017). As students progress toward completion of their coursework, Tinto found relevance to matters that concern the students to be a major factor in retention to completion. Tinto indicated that relevance is students' understanding that what they learn matters now and in the future, and that what is learned will be used. Tinto described two ways to address relevance: (a) that students enroll in a field of study that fits their interest and (b) that students understand how to relate their curriculum to their field of study. Project-based learning and internships are often used to accomplish the

relationship to curriculum and field of study. If the coursework is challenging and completable, even if academic support is required to complete the assignment, there is a higher likelihood of student retention and completion (Tinto, 2017). Relevance is a critical component for student retention and, along with relevance, expectations must be made clear.

Students entering the higher education system are expected to know what is needed to gain admission and register for classes, but those expectations are unfounded (Tinto, 2012). Tinto (1993) intimated that the first encounter students make with institutions of higher education is the admissions process. It is during this first encounter that institutions should provide students with a good first impression and a sense of belonging so they are more likely to be retained in the higher education system. Tinto (2012) again aligned with Bandura (1977) when the former stated that students who are provided with clear expectations and a pathway to achieve a degree will meet those expectations and be retained to completion. This echoes Bandura's (1977) conclusion that not only do clear expectation contribute to retention and completion, but they also contribute to an increase in students' self-efficacy due to the successful completion of activities. Institutional leaders must understand what types of guidance a student needs and what information the student is lacking, and then provide the necessary means for a student to be successful (Tinto, 2017). Faculty must provide the student with clear expectations as to what is necessary to succeed (Tinto, 2012). Tinto reported that students

who do not understand how much effort is required to be successful will have difficulty being retained when they do not achieve academic success.

Tinto's models of student retention have been widely accepted but Roksa and Whitley (2017) further investigated academic success using motivation, race, and faculty as variables in their study. According to these researchers, some minority students can become academically and socially engaged, leading to a sense of belonging; however, this engagement is dependent on students' perception of faculty as having an interest in their learning and development. It is the interaction between the students and faculty that is one of the most important aspects of academic motivation and success.

Literature Review Related to Persistence to Completion

Retention and completion are topics that have been extensively studied and analyzed by educational researchers. Institutional administrators as well as students who enter the higher education system in search of a good job and a change in their socioeconomic status both consider retention and completion to be important topics. As retention and completion are so important to administrators and individual students, several researchers have conducted studies in order to understand what students need to help them achieve their higher education goals. Very few research studies have been conducted, however, to determine which experiences students, particularly Hispanic students, attribute to provide the necessary support and means to complete their programs.

Self-Efficacy

Covarrubias et al. (2018) surveyed first-generation and continuing-generation students. These researchers reported that first-generation students had less positive academic self-concept and significantly fewer parent-student conversations regarding college, resulting in lower self-efficacy. Additional results of the study showed a direct correlation between positive academic self-concept and grades. Yet the authors reported that those first-generation students showed an increased positive academic self-concept when the students had the opportunity to discuss college. They further reported that through a faculty member's mentorship and encouragement students began to gain an understanding of how to achieve success in higher education. As the student's self-efficacy increased so too did interaction with peers. The peer interaction provided the student with a way to gain confidence in completing a degree as the student was able to discuss aspirations with other students who had similar goals. Student-to-student mentorships proved to be an important factor in forming a sense of belonging and in student retention.

Students are motivated to complete college to improve their socioeconomic status and find work in a field they enjoy. Family values are strong motivational factors, as families are often integrated into the academic setting to aid in overcoming social challenges and barriers (Pina-Watson et al., 2015). Family values, "familismo," is when students maintain a close relationship with family because family support is essential to students' success (Pina-Watson et al.). Pina-Watson et al. interviewed 181 Hispanic

students to correlate cognitive and cultural variables. Results of the study indicated that bicultural stress and ethnic identity affected academic motivation, and that bicultural stress negatively impacted academic motivation.

According to a study conducted by Blackwell and Pinder (2014), students with a low socioeconomic background were motivated by their desire for a better life. These researchers also discussed the importance of social support via peer-to-peer and faculty-to-student mentorship as a way to increase intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy, which may be experiences Hispanic students cite as contributing to their degree completions. The importance of support has been identified throughout the research studies; the support comes in a variety of ways including academic, financial, and social. Blackwell and Pinder also reported that many of the minority college students worked while attending college. While this was stressful, the students explained that the desire for a better living situation was seen as achievable via higher education. As a result, they were motivated to overcome any difficulties. Most of the students saw working while attending college as a temporary situation. Motivation for a better life is an important aspect of self-efficacy, but the research studies have not determined how important motivation is for completion.

Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons (2015) studied a group of students called the neglected minority, defined as low-income students who often have similar barriers as Hispanic students, particularly in terms of backgrounds unfamiliar with higher education. These researchers interviewed 18 low-income college students to determine what led to

their second-year persistence at a community college. The interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting which allowed the opportunity for follow-up questions. Students indicated the reason for enrolling in community college as community college provides the opportunity for improved employment and helps set a positive example for their children. The students indicated that their own self-determination assisted in the adjustment to higher education but that support from campus faculty and staff was instrumental in their persistence. The students in Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons' study were community college students who had completed their first year of community college and were enrolled in their second year, but they had not yet completed their degrees; therefore, it is unclear to what extent the participants' persistence to completion stretched.

Many Hispanic students begin community college with a feeling of unpreparedness, not only in understanding the higher education system but also in preparation for academic rigor. Seven out of 10 of Vega's (2016) student participants reported completing rigorous coursework in high school; courses such as AP or dual credit courses. For these students it was this rigorous coursework that provided the students with the academic foundation needed to succeed in higher education. The students' motivation came through family, advisors, and peer support systems, forming a sense of belonging and increasing self-efficacy. The research studies (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015; Pina-Watson et al., 2015; Vega,

2016) indicated that the ability to overcome obstacles came through determination and motivation as well as the support of family, teachers, and peers.

Students who acknowledged their academic weaknesses have persisted with the aid of academic and mentor support. There are additional ways for students to gain the skills needed to succeed. Students who understood they were academically underprepared began to enhance their studies and foundational knowledge through their love of reading (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Blackwell and Pinder found the students not only increased their knowledge through reading but were also motivated when reading biographies of people who overcame humble beginnings and were successful. The students began to adopt the attitude that if others could overcome obstacles, so could they.

As students begin to take ownership of their academic success, the locus of control shifts from external to internal. In this shift students develop an understanding that they oversee their future (Karaman et al., 2018). Villareal and Garcia (2016) interviewed 18 minority male students in community college with the goal of understanding their motivation to persist. The researchers' focus was the students who were completing basic and transfer-level writing courses. The study found that students who completed their writing course did so because they had an academic goal to achieve—and the writing course was part of the requirement for completion. Students also described situations when they wanted to drop the writing course; primarily during times when they felt overwhelmed. Despite feeling this way, the students indicated the reason they completed the writing course was due to the support they received from the

faculty in addition to tutoring. Villareal and Garcia reported intrinsic motivation increased after interacting with their English faculty members, supporting the self-efficacy concept. The research studies previously discussed have shown the need for academic, social, and financial support, all of which can facilitate self-efficacy.

Sense of Belonging

Vega (2016) interviewed 10 first-generation Hispanic students to determine what elements influenced the students' enrollment and persistence, since first-generation students have limited knowledge of higher education. The students in Vega's study identified three support networks that helped them enroll and persist: high school personnel, family, and friends. High school personnel encouraged the students to apply for college and assisted in the application process. The higher education process was facilitated by family members who provided encouragement and older siblings who had already entered college and were familiar with the higher education process. Vega also found that friends provided a network of encouragement and emotional support. Although this study was conducted at a 4-year university rather than in the community college setting where most Hispanic students begin their education, the author described the study as exploratory and encouraged further research into elements that affect students' persistence and completion to help fill the gap in the research.

Mertes (2015) surveyed 308 community college students to determine what aspects of belonging students deemed more relevant to their success. Mertes's study revealed that students gain a feeling of a sense of belonging when faculty show concern

for them as students, taking a general interest in them and their overall development. Mertes' study supports students' increased sense of belonging through faculty-student relationships as compared to peer mentorships. The surveys were given in a classroom setting with no participant-researcher interaction, demonstrating a gap in the research.

Some researchers have focused on Hispanic males, as they are less likely to complete a degree. Rodriguez et al. (2016) surveyed Hispanic males in community college to determine the role of student-faculty interactions. These students reported that they did not want to lose their "machismo" or appear dumb or inferior by seeking support from faculty members. In addition, while Hispanic male students looked for a faculty member who could understand their culture and community, they expressed their hesitancy to interact with faculty members if the faculty members seemed unapproachable and inaccessible (Rodriguez et al.).

Ponjuan and Hernandez's (2016) conceptual paper supported the conclusion of Rodriguez and colleagues; Hispanic male students looked to Hispanic faculty as role models. Ponjuan and Hernandez determined that Hispanic students found Hispanic faculty members more approachable and supportive as well as more engaging in the classroom. Hart (2019) interviewed 45 community college students to examine what keeps students retained in community college and to determine if changes in the community college could make more of a difference. The students' backgrounds were varied, with the study not focusing on any certain demographics. These students, Hart reported, did not find academic support within the higher education system, and could not

rely on employment in the community college to provide enough funding to alleviate financial stress. Further, these students commented on a lack of childcare. Hart's study provided information on extraneous influences that can affect students' persistence to completion. These extraneous influences are an important aspect of academic life and revealed another gap in research, regarding how the academic environment affects Hispanic student persistence and completion.

There are two factors, according to Rodriguez et al. (2016), that encourage Hispanic males to interact with faculty: (a) whether or not the faculty member shared the same ethnicity or seemed to understand Hispanic culture and (b) whether the faculty member expressed a sense of caring and encouraged interaction. Once the faculty member understood these barriers and was able to work toward removing the barriers, the researchers found that Hispanic males were motivated and encouraged to complete their education. Rodriguez and Greer (2017) interviewed two men of color to develop a sense of understanding regarding how these two young men were able to reach their higher education goals. Each student had a difficult journey down the higher education path and were often was ready to quit, but it was the opportunities, mentorship, and support that provided the incentive to persevere. Counter-narratives in the classrooms, Rodriguez and Greer noted, provided a way for students to share their own stories and form a sense of belonging. These classroom narratives provided a venue for these two voices to be heard, though it is difficult to determine patterns and themes with such a small number of participants.

Hispanic students also encounter familial barriers while attending college, which can affect their sense of belonging. The barriers Hispanic students encounter are due to the complex role of familial relationships and the student's role within the family (Storlie et al., 2014). The demands from family and work can be physical and psychological, affecting the ability of the students to attend their courses and concentrate on schoolwork. In Storlie et al.'s (2014) study, Hispanic female students did not feel the demand to provide financially, but rather their assistance was needed in the home and within family life. Many students who did not complete a degree gave finances and lack of family support as reasons for leaving college (Bergman et al., 2014). Students from Bergman et al.'s (2014) research explained that the conflict between work and classes was a reason for noncompletion.

Museus et al. (2016) examined the impact of a culturally engaging campus environment (CECE) on a diverse group of students. The campus environment committee reviewed two major components—cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness—in order to determine the impact on student experiences and outcomes. These researchers defined cultural relevance as providing college students with the opportunity to interact with higher education personnel who have similar backgrounds and experiences, opportunities to learn and exchange knowledge about their own culture, opportunities to give back to their own cultural communities, and experiences that allow students from various backgrounds to engage with others while still feeling their culture is respected. Cultural responsiveness comprised four factors: (a) the extent to which there is a sense of

campus collaboration, (b) the extent to which the students interact with faculty, (c) the extent to which the faculty interact with students, and (d) the extent to which the students are supported or have access to information that provides support. Museus and colleagues developed a survey to determine the impact of cultural responsiveness and cultural relevance on the students. Results of the study indicated that cultural familiarity and culturally relevant knowledge were meaningful to the students and should be studied further. This study had limitations. A major concern was that students were surveyed via email, not allowing for follow-up questions to attain additional information. The researchers acknowledged the limitations of their study in that the responses were a snapshot, reflecting students' thoughts at the time the data were collected, with no assurance that those thoughts and response may change over time.

Relevance and Expectations

In 2018, Kirk and Watt conducted a qualitative study to examine how Mexican American students participating in the AVID for higher education program felt about their preparedness for higher education and the workforce. The qualitative study was phenomenology and heuristic inquiry. Kirk and Watt (2018) examined how Mexican American students perceived their preparation for the workforce and how they perceived their efficacy in completing a college credential. They recruited first-generation students of Mexican descent to participate in a focus group, but only seven students opted to participate. The goal of the focus group study was to determine how well the student success course promoted student engagement and success. The Mexican American

students described the student success course as a place to develop social and cultural relationships and one that provided information about educational resources. In order to determine how social and cultural networks contribute to college completion, Kirk and Watt also surveyed Hispanic American students for their beliefs in how networks assist in persistence to completion. The research goal was to gather data with the use of focus groups and multiparty interviews. Students were selected using a purposive sampling method. Focus group interviews were conducted using semi structured questions and a follow-up focus group interview was conducted three months later. Interviews were transcribed and descriptive summaries were analyzed, looking for themes. Data were analyzed and results were discussed. An entry-level college success course was credited as a good beginning for student success in higher education. Positive family expectations and sharing college experiences with families were essential in student persistence and success. Kirk and Watt offered tentative conclusions from the research study due to the limited number of participants, particularly with the follow-up interviews. The gaps in Kirk and Watt's research were the small number of participants and the weak link to student success.

Tovar (2015) conducted a research study to determine how instructors, counselors, and student support programs influence Hispanic community college students' success and intent to persist to degree completion. There were 397 Hispanic community college students who participated in the study, with all the students currently in their second semester of community college. The results of the study indicated that

support programs had a small but significant effect on students' success; further, an even smaller contributor was interaction with faculty outside the classroom. In this study, Tovar found that what was more important was the support provided by family and friends. As Tovar's research study drew from a database of students participating in a larger research study, the data were not collected in a face-to-face setting and were collected from students completing only their second semester of college. This large-scale approach did not capture data from completers or near-completers and lacked the ability to gather data in a face-to-face setting. Many of the research findings reported the positive attitude of instructors as an important aspect of student success but the gap in the research is whether instructor attitude has a major impact on Hispanic students' persistence to completion.

As research begins to focus on Hispanic students, data indicate that 27% of Hispanic students are first-generation students (Redford et al., 2017), and, of those students, 51% enter community college (Excelencia in Education, 2018). Continuing-generation students (Covarrubias et al., 2018) have a possible advantage over first-generation students: the understanding and ability to navigate higher education. The understanding of higher education begins with conversations between family members and children. Although parents of first-generation students may not understand higher education and its processes, it is critical they provide parental encouragement (Covarrubias et al., 2018; Goldsmith & Kurpius, 2018; Vega, 2016). Vega's (2016) data analysis confirmed the importance of family support as a motivating factor in Hispanic

students' success. Vega reported that families began discussing college before students even entered high school, and the early discussions helped students understand the need for higher education. In families with parents who were Mexican immigrants, students identified their parents' motivation as an important factor in their higher education success (Goldsmith & Kurpius, 2018). Students with Mexican immigrant parents described the hardships and struggles their parents endured and understood their parents' encouragement toward higher education (Goldsmith & Kurpius, 2018). The main theme, Goldsmith and Kurpius (2018) concluded, was that their parents' motivation to immigrate was because the United States provided many more opportunities, and, through education, a better life. It is often through the parents' desire of a better life for their children that first-generation Hispanic students begin their higher education journey.

The research of Murphy and Murphy (2018) supported previous studies that indicated Hispanic students found navigating college difficult and did not understand the expectations of higher education. This study revealed that the difficulties arise with both the students' and parents' ability to understand the college process and the lack of understanding of expectations of the higher education system. Hispanic students, in particular first-generation students, were often unaware of the expectations and, therefore, the consequences of not attending class. Many were also unaware that dropping a class affects financial aid and scholarships. When programs were implemented that provided the missing information to the students and parents, the researchers reported a 37% increase in retention rates over an 8-year span. By outlining and clarifying

expectations, program leaders found that student retention and persistence to completion increased.

Summary and Conclusions

In my review of the literature, I examined research studies conducted to determine students' retention and persistence with a focus on minority students and students in community college. The reviewed studies addressed minority students in higher education, their experiences with the admissions process, and their academic progress; however, the research lacked interviews with minority students chronicling their personal experiences that led to persistence and completion. Also, many studies addressed the persistence of minority students at 4-year universities but not at community colleges, where the majority of Hispanic students enter the higher education system.

As Hispanic students enter higher education, literature indicated that both students and family are unfamiliar with the process and need support in understanding the multiple components of the collegiate matriculation process. Higher education faculty and staff can show support to Hispanic students not only with regards to providing guidance and defining expectations, but also in the academic setting through an informal mentorship.

Faculty members who are approachable and understand Hispanic culture are a source of support for Hispanic students. Once a faculty-student relationship is formed, the ongoing relationship creates a sense of belonging and a source of academic support for the student. Student-to-student peer relationship is another form of academic support that

can overlap with social support. Students who form peer relationships often find commonality and are frequently more comfortable in the academic setting with a resulting increase in self-efficacy.

Community colleges provide access to higher education for many students who would not otherwise attend college. My literature review revealed a great deal of information regarding retention; the actions that lead students to actually completing a degree is the gap in the research, particularly for the Hispanic student population. Retention is the beginning of degree completion and Hispanic students have provided information on retention. It is that last part of the journey for the Hispanic student, degree completion, which has no empirical research found in the literature. The question then becomes what experiences Hispanic students consider most important for retention that leads to completion, a critical gap in the research.

In Chapter 3, I describe the research design and the rationale for the design, including the study variables and the link to the research questions. I also describe my role as researcher, discuss any potential bias, and include a description of the methodology for participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, I outline areas of possible concern regarding trustworthiness and the ethical procedures that will guide the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to identify Hispanic graduates' perspectives on experiences that contributed to successful community college degree completion. In this chapter, I describe the research design and rationale and my role as researcher. Further, I identify any potential biases resulting from personal and professional relationships and I discuss participant selection. I also summarize data collection and analysis and approaches to increasing trustworthiness. I address ethical concerns, including assurance of confidentiality.

Research Design and Rationale

The research design chosen is a basic qualitative research study. Such an approach typically uses interviews as a source of data (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) described basic qualitative research design as attempting to uncover the participants' experiences and the meaning the participants attribute to those experiences. Patton (2015) defined basic qualitative inquiry as a method used to answer straightforward questions. Kahlke (2014) described a basic qualitative study as a method not bound by one or more forms of the established qualitative methodologies but one that can be used to find emergent patterns and themes. Kahlke continued the description of basic qualitative research as a generic study to understand people's experiences. This understanding of experiences is the gap I identified in other research studies. Although focus groups can be used in qualitative studies, focus groups have limitations such as the number of questions that can be asked or the available response time for everyone. Also, focus group

discussion may lead to what is similar among participants rather than experiences unique to individual participants. For these reasons, I concluded that individual interviews would better suit my research study. Basic qualitative studies can focus on an action, in this case community college completion, and how the action is explained (Creswell, 2013). This description aligns with the goal of this research study.

I considered other research approaches before concluding that a basic qualitative research study would be the best approach. A grounded theory approach was considered; however, grounded theory is used to develop a theory (Creswell, 2013). The focus of my research study was to interview recent graduates, looking for similar themes and patterns—not to develop a theory. A case study approach was also considered. A case study typically uses at least three data points or data sources; my research used student interviews as the data source, with the acknowledgement that student experiences can best be defined and described by students themselves. A case study gathers data from a single context, a specific time and place or event (Patton, 2015). In contrast, I interviewed several individuals without conducting observations of them in a particular setting, as this is not necessary to answer the research questions. Phenomenology was another approach that was considered. However, phenomenology answers the questions regarding the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience (Patton, 2015), whereas a basic qualitative study interprets the individuals' experiences and perceptions in relationship to a practical problem (Ravitch & Carl, 2015).

Role of the Researcher

Creswell (2013) defined qualitative researchers as data collectors who collect data through participant interviews. As the researcher, I developed open-ended interview questions and was prepared to extend the questions when additional information became apparent in the interview (Patton, 2015). Rubin and Rubin (2012) described three characteristics associated with an in-depth qualitative interviewer: (a) the researcher asks questions to elicit narratives and detailed information; (b) the researcher asks open-ended questions, which assists in obtaining narratives; and (c) the researcher has a set of questions but does not have to follow a manuscript; rather, the questions can be asked in any order with follow-up questions, if necessary. I developed my interview questions with these characteristics in mind and aligned my strategy with the characteristics during the interviews, including follow-up questions and changed the order of the questions depending on how the interview flowed.

Although I am not employed at the community college where the research was conducted, I do have a collegial and professional relationship with some faculty and administrators. I had no personal or professional relationships with the student participants; therefore, I had no formal power over the participants. Any potential bias that may have occurred was my professed connection to Hispanic students. I, myself, am a Hispanic doctoral student and am aware of the challenges of degree completion. I am also a faculty member and administrator at an HSI community college, so I am aware of student obstacles and ways in which I encourage students to persist and complete. I have

acknowledged and addressed my biases through awareness and a self-reflection journal. My role as researcher was to strive for honest, meaningful, credible, and empirically supported findings (Patton, 2015).

Methodology

Participant Selection

Participants I selected for this study were Hispanics who were recent graduates from a Hispanic-serving community college located in a Southwestern state in the United States. I used purposeful sampling to select participants. Creswell (2013) described purposeful sampling in a basic qualitative study as selecting participants who can contribute to the study through their knowledge and experience about the phenomenon of interest. The participation criteria were that individuals (a) self-identified as Hispanic and (b) were recent graduates, within the last year, with an associate degree.

Support for the participant recruitment process came through the research site president's office and the Office of Institutional Research (OIR), which gathers data related to students, ethnicity, and graduation. The administrators gave permission for an email invitation to be sent to potential participants. The president requested that the OIR assist in sending the email invitation to graduates who self-identified in their enrollment process as Hispanic and who have completed an associate degree within the last year.

There is no defined number of research participants required for a basic qualitative study. Participants in a basic qualitative study should be chosen based on whether they can contribute to the collection of data in relating their experiences in

higher education (Creswell, 2013). The number of participants will vary depending on what is learned as interviews are conducted, as there are no formal rules indicating a required number of participants. However, it is important to note that Patton (2015) suggested an initial number of six participants with a plan to continue interviewing until data saturation occurs. I planned to interview 8-10 participants for the research study. As data were acquired and no new information, themes, or patterns were obtained through additional interviews, the study had reached the saturation point (Patton, 2015).

Saturation also occurs when there are enough data to support claims and identify patterns and themes. As the data were collected and analyzed, I looked for depth and richness (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I reviewed the responses to ensure that I could report answers to the research questions.

Instrumentation

I developed a semi structured, open-ended interview guide (see Appendix). Each question was developed to gain information that helped understand the experiences of Hispanic graduates who had recently completed an associate degree. I developed the interview questions using my literature review and Tinto's concepts as a foundation; however, I used follow-up questions and probing questions to dig deeper into Hispanic students' experiences. Castillo-Montoya (2016) suggested these four steps for developing an interview protocol: (a) ensuring the interview questions align with the research questions, (b) designing interview questions that will invoke good discussion and conversation, (c) recruiting others to review the process, and (d) piloting the research

study. I developed the interview questions using an open-ended format and used the research questions as a basis to elicit the information from the graduates. I conducted mock interviews or dry runs with at least three colleagues who played the role of participant. These mock interviews allowed me to ensure the questions were phrased so I could obtain the information needed to answer my research questions.

In developing open-ended interview questions, the goal is to encourage a conversation between the researcher and the participant so that information pertinent to the research questions can be elicited. This approach reflects responsive interviewing, a type of qualitative interviewing where the researcher and participant develop rapport and the participants are comfortable answering questions and providing information regarding their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I began the responsive interviews with a prefatory statement (Patton, 2015) introducing myself as the interviewer, as well as revealing the nature of the questions. The prefatory statement described my background, my study, and the information I was interested in obtaining. It further detailed the purpose of the study. Both my invitation and interview guide (see Appendix) contained such a prefatory statement.

Data Collection

I planned to follow these steps for data collection in my research study: the first was to gain Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, which required IRB approval from the institution where the study was to be conducted. I had planned to send via the institution's OIR an email invitation in which I extended an invitation to

participate in the research through a Zoom (i.e., videoconference) or telephone interview, explaining the reason for the research, and requesting for Hispanic recent graduates to take part in the interview with compensation of a \$25 eGift card to those who participated. I asked interested participants to email or text me directly through contact information provided in the invitation. I began contacting the students who indicated an interest and met the selection criteria, sending the consent form and scheduling Zoom or telephone interviews. The participants were selected on a first-come-first-serve basis. My goal was to interview 8-10 participants, and if data saturation was not reached, I would have increased the number of participants by one or two until data saturation was reached. I would have continued accepting participants until I reached said data saturation. At that point, I would have thanked the additional respondents for contacting me and indicated that the project had been completed with those who responded earlier.

I planned to schedule interviews with individuals at a day and time convenient to them, allowing enough time for each participant to fully disclose any relevant information. I set up a Zoom or telephone interview, sent the consent form and meeting invitation at least 2 days before the interview. I wrote the interview questions in ordinary, conversational language, and the interviewees were encouraged to answer in their own words—with a focus on the participants' experiences and knowledge.

The interview began with general questions intended to create a sense of interest, then the more focused questions were asked. I audio-recorded the interview using the Zoom (<https://zoom.us/>) and REV (<https://www.rev.com/>) recorder app as the REV

recorder app records and transcribes the interviews. Only one interview was conducted via telephone and recorded using the REV recorder app only. This interview process allowed me to take brief notes so that I could be a responsive interviewer and elicit in-depth, quality responses. After each interview, I reviewed the recording and transcription to ensure that the device captured the interview. If the device had failed, I would have immediately written down notes and observations. In this basic qualitative study, I was the sole interviewer and data collector, sole interview transcriptionist through use of Zoom and the REV recorder app, and sole data analyst. I dated the notes, noted the location, and recorded any descriptive information. I informed the participants that a copy of the transcript would be provided for their review and editing, to ensure the accuracy of the information. I provided assurance of confidentiality in the invitation and again at the end of the interview. I used an identification coding system so that no personal information or characteristics of participants could be identified. The Zoom recording and REV recorder transcriptions are in secure, password-protected location. All information is secured in a locked filing cabinet or in encrypted files on my personal computer.

Data Analysis

I read the transcripts after downloading from the REV Recorder app and compared the transcripts with Zoom's audio-recording—concentrating on the participants' responses. As I reviewed the participants' responses, I had noted quotes relevant to the interview and research questions. I summarized participant information in a table with these column titles: (a) participant pseudonym, (b) gender, (c) age range, (d)

background, and (e) discipline of interest. As I developed the data table, I was able to discern patterns and themes. The first two columns were filled first and, as I began to accumulate data, I was able to develop code categories, patterns, and themes. Patton (2015) described qualitative data analysis as taking a great amount of data, determining what is significant, identifying patterns, and communicating the data that are significant. I analyzed data after the first interview and continued data sorting and analysis after each subsequent interview. Through the data sorting and analysis, I looked for emergent patterns and themes, adding to the patterns and themes as interviews continue. This allowed a check for data saturation and revealed areas that required more focus.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility and Validity

Trustworthiness speaks to the quality of the observations made by the researcher; these observations must be completed in a fair and objective manner. The interaction between the researcher and the participant must not be skewed in any way and the participant must feel a sense of privacy and ability to speak openly. To establish credibility, I have described the experience, training, and perspective that I brought to the study (Patton, 2015). I have also described any personnel connections I had to the study's participants and the research location's administrators. By describing personnel connections, I became aware of any potential bias and, along with a reflective journal, was able to acknowledge and report such bias. I provided an honest and accurate analysis of the data by verifying the transcription and notes taken during the interview process

against the interview recording. By using a reflective journal, I was able to identify and address my bias. As I collected and summarized the data, I looked for common themes and patterns and, when no additional information was evident, I knew that I had reached saturation.

Transferability

I sought to make data collection, summary, and analysis transparent. Each step in the research study was detailed in such a way that the study could be replicated, and that data may be defined as a “thick description.” To enhance transferability, the context along with the behaviors and experiences were detailed (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). I provided a detailed description of the participants and outlined the research process itself. Data analysis is described in detail so that readers can review the research study and results to determine if these can be applied in their own setting. My goal with this research study was to determine Hispanic graduates’ perspectives on experiences that contributed to successful community college degree completion, so that community college administrators can use the results—with a goal of increasing completions. The research study is rich with description, explaining each step and describing the participants.

Dependability

Dependability of research is described as ensuring the accepted standards and consistency for the research design (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). I have reviewed research literature and standards so that there is congruity between my qualitative research design,

data collection, and analysis. I have provided detailed accounts of my participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. I detailed my rationale for codes and themes. The data collection and analysis followed the procedures outlined in the previous sections. Dependability in qualitative research also included any changes the researcher made during the interview process to accommodate any preliminary data analysis. I included any changes made to the interview questions in the research study. Participants' answers were recorded for dependability and accuracy, and I wrote notes after each interview.

Confirmability

I endeavored to be methodical in the interpretation process, acknowledging any potential bias so that so that analysis will as free of bias as possible. I detailed a methodical process of data collection, data analysis, and interpretation in an audit trail. I used a reflective journal as an important part of the confirmability process by recording possible bias in the journal, determining rationale for coding, and noting the process to ensure neutrality. Research findings are supported by the research data.

Ethical Procedures

I interviewed participants with the goal of gathering data, experiences, and knowledge—not to change people or pass judgement (Patton, 2015). Patton described an ethical checklist for qualitative research which includes certain key elements. These elements include how to approach the interviews, how to design the evaluation with

attention to ethical issues, plans to ensure the findings are clear and credible, and reminders to include full disclosure.

Researchers are to maintain neutrality while remembering the goal(s) of the research study. In addition to maintaining neutrality, I also maintained the confidentiality of the participants (Creswell, 2013) and shared how the data will be used. I fully described the recruitment process to the administrators of the identified study location. I assured the participants of confidentiality, to include restricting sharing of names and removal of personal identifiers during data reporting. To safeguard confidentiality, I did not use real names and instead assigned each participant a pseudonym. If any of the participants opted out at any time during the interview, the data gathering process, the information would have been deleted and not included in the study. The interviewees were informed that they are participating in a research study, and the purpose of the research study was discussed (Creswell, 2013). This information was included in the prefatory, written out and read aloud so that the information is consistent.

I maintained data collected during the interview process in a secure location. When I gathered the data, I ensured participants' names were not directly associated with the data. I placed physical files in a secure filing system, and electronic storage of data are password-protected on my personal computer or external electronic storage device.

Summary

In this chapter I identified the research questions and described the method used to answer these questions. I detailed the research design, that of a basic qualitative study,

and provided the rationale regarding the choice of a basic qualitative study to research Hispanic graduates' perspectives on experiences contributing to successful community college degree completion. I described the phenomenon of interest and how the phenomenon will be researched. I described my role as researcher and identified any potential biases resulting from personal and professional relationships. In the methodology section, I described participant selection and provided details on the selection and interview process. I outlined the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes. Finally, I detailed how ethical concerns will be addressed, including assurance of confidentiality.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to identify which experiences Hispanic graduates cite as contributing to successful degree completion at community college. I used interviews as a source of data for this basic qualitative study, gathering experiences and information directly from the participants. The two research questions for this study were as follows:

RQ1: What community college experiences do Hispanic graduates believe supported their degree completions?

RQ2: What experiences outside the community college do Hispanic graduates believe contributed to their degree completions?

In this chapter, I describe the interview setting and the demographics of the participants. I also include a description of how the data were collected, including any variations from the presented plan, data analysis with codes, categories and themes, and evidence of trustworthiness. The chapter ends with the results and summary of the basic qualitative study.

Setting

The setting for this study was a commuter community college in the southwestern part of the United States. The institution is a designated HSI, which I will refer to as Community College of the Southwestern United States (CCSUS), a pseudonym. In spring 2020, CCSUS had a total enrollment of approximately 7000 students with 75% of those students self-identified as Hispanic. The community college has two major campuses and

two satellite campuses. All participants attended at least one of the two major campuses and some also attended one of the satellite campuses. My initial research design was for in-person interviews but due to the COVID-19 pandemic; I adjusted the design to incorporate virtual interviews.

Demographics

Of the 10 participants, six were male and four were female. All 10 had completed an associate degree within the last year and were planning to or were already continuing their educations. Four of the participants had been students at an early college high school and one participant had been a dual credit student. Early college high schools bring college into high schools by offering students the opportunity to earn a high school diploma and a college-level credential and/or degree at the same time (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020). The Public Education Department described the dual credit program as an opportunity for qualified high school students to obtain credit for college coursework at a public or tribal higher education institution while simultaneously completing high school electives and graduation requirements (New Mexico Higher Education Department, 2018). The participants' demographic information is listed in Table 1, using the pseudonyms I assigned each participant.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age range	Background	Discipline of interest
Steven	M	Under 18	Early college high school	Creative Writing
Chris	M	18-21	Early college high school	Civil Engineering
Lucy	F	18-21	Early college high school	Chemical Engineering
Barbara	F	18-21	Early college high school	Electrical Engineering
Frank	M	18-21	Dual credit student	Information Technology
Isabel	F	18-21	Traditional student	Education
Robert	M	22-24	Traditional student	Business
David	M	25-34	Civil service employee	Computer Networking
Pete	M	35-49	Retired military	Social Work
Carla	F	35-49	Substitute teacher	Early Childhood

Data Collection

The criteria I used when requesting possible participants' emails from the participating institution were recent associate degree graduates, within the time period of June 2019 to May 2020, and those who self-identified as Hispanic. The community college's OIR provided me with a list of email addresses. I designed my research so that the OIR would email the invitations and, as this was a change in research design and a change from Chapter 3, the change was submitted to and approved by the Walden University IRB, who served as the IRB of record (July 15, 2020, IRB approval number 06-29-20-0401354), and the participating institution (April 28, 2020, project number

20019). Once I received the approvals, I emailed the invitations. I used the email addresses provided and sent invitations to the list of 593 graduates. As participants responded to the email invitations, we collaborated in setting up a day and time for the interview. Once the appointment was scheduled, I sent the consent form and asked the participant to read the form and reply with “I consent” via email. The participants were selected on a first-come-first-served basis. I received 13 replies to one email invitation but only 11 participants followed up with the consent form. When completing the IRB form, I indicated that I would not actively recruit minors, and I did not actively recruit minors. I had participants who had completed an associate degree through early college high school; when two of those students arrived at the interview, I discovered that they were under the age of 18 but very close to having their 18th birthday. After they reached majority age, I emailed those two participants with the consent form and asked for consent. I received consent from one but not the other, whose information is not included in the data analysis.

The interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes. I used Zoom to audio record and transcribe the interviews. I converted the Zoom transcriptions to Word files, compared to the audio recordings for accuracy, and made changes to maintain accuracy. I sent the transcriptions to each of the participants and requested corrections or additions. The only reply was from one participant who indicated his name was not correct on the transcript. I reminded the participant that I had used a pseudonym.

As I reviewed the transcripts, the importance of sustained availability of faculty and staff emerged as a theme. I was interested to know if participants perceived the ethnicity of faculty and staff to be important data; therefore, I contacted each of the participants with the follow-up question regarding the ethnicity of their faculty and staff member who provided guidance; notably all were of Hispanic ethnicity.

Data Analysis

I read all the transcripts several times, highlighting responses that were indicative of patterns. I tagged each highlighted section with comments indicating which research question the response pertained to and a word or phrase that summarized the response; this was my process of coding the responses. I then set up a Microsoft Word document with the research questions and under each question listed the words and phrases from the interviews. After rearranging the words and phrases into common areas or categories, I identified six themes from the categories. The two themes related to RQ1 were sustained availability of faculty and advisors and staff and access to community college resources. The four themes related to RQ2 were value of education, family, intrinsic motivation and organization, and networking.

Not all findings were addressed by each participant as each participant's experience was different. However, there were enough commonalities in the responses to confirm saturation, derive codes, and identify the subsequent themes. The relationship between the themes and codes is identified in Table 2.

Table 2*Relationship Between Themes and Codes*

Theme	Codes	Definitions
Sustained availability of faculty and advisors and staff	Advisors, admissions staff, professors, faculty advisors, faculty, department chair, staff	Encompasses the faculty, advisors, and staff who guided and assisted student during their academic career with the relationships forming a connection between the faculty, advisors, staff, and other personnel at the community college and the students
Access to community college resources	Group work, study groups, library, computer lab, tutoring, internships, conferences, friends, peers, dual credit, early college high school	Support and academic resources that were available to students including the library, computer lab, and tutoring. Support was achieved through study groups and peers
Value of education	College degree beneficial, more options for career, new skills set, diversity, work hard now and not so much later, promotion, better self, better life, social change	A way to achieve a better job or promotion and to better one's self
Family	One of first in family to graduate, support from family both emotionally and financially, encouraged by family members, family members pushed and told about the importance of high education, felt it was a family obligation to graduate, participated in other family members' graduation celebrations	Incorporated support from the family including emotional and financial support and also encouragement to complete college
Intrinsic motivation and organization	Overcame previous academic stigma, took ownership of education, became self-reliant, organization, moved from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation	The desire to succeed and achieve goals; students taking ownership of their education.
Networking	Church youth groups, support from fellow employees	Interacting with others who have completed their education and provided encouragement and support

In a research study, discrepant cases refer to those cases that differ significantly from the other cases. In qualitative research, within each theme there are variations in the descriptions and patterns. I factored all participants into the analysis and found there were no discrepant cases.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility with regards to the interaction between the researcher and the participant must not be skewed in any way, and the participant must feel a sense of privacy and ability to speak openly. At the beginning of each interview, I reminded the participants that during the interview process they had the option to not provide feedback if they felt uncomfortable with a particular question. As the interview process progressed, I would submit one or two transcripts to my committee members. It was through their feedback that I was reminded to remain neutral, to avoid passing judgement even if it is a positive one. Before each interview, I made a note to remain neutral. In the reflective journal, I noted the difficulty in not providing praise when the participants were describing their accomplishments or something with which I agreed. I compared the Zoom transcripts to the audio recording and revised the transcripts to maintain accuracy. I emailed a copy of the transcripts to the participants requesting feedback and corrections; none were given. As I collected and summarized the data, I looked for patterns and saturation were reached when interview responses were similar to previous data and there were no additional data provided.

Transferability

Each step of the research study was detailed in such a way that the study can be replicated. I have described the setting of the study, including some of the demographics of the community college, so the readers can determine if the study's findings can be transferred to other settings or individuals (Creswell, 2013). I have described the participants and outlined the research process so readers may be confident of the research design and evaluate any possible transferability of the findings from my study to their situations. I have also detailed the data analysis process to assist readers with the determination of transferability.

Dependability

Dependability of research is described as ensuring the accepted standards and consistency for the research design (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). I have provided details of my participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. I was consistent in the recruitment and interview process. I used my interview guide throughout each interview and probed the participants when short answers were given, and more information could prove valuable to the research. I have detailed my rationale for codes and themes. I recorded participants' answers for dependability and accuracy, and I wrote notes and observations after each interview. All the findings, interpretations, and recommendation are supported by the data.

Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative research is related to the study's findings which are based on the participants' narratives and words and my objectivity throughout the research study. I have recorded the interviews and verified the transcripts by comparing the Zoom transcription to the audio recordings. I maintained a journal acknowledging any biases. I was able to remain neutral with the experience I gained throughout the interview process. I was methodical in the interpretation process by highlighting important responses in the interviews and identifying patterns and codes in those responses. The interpretations of the findings are clearly derived from the data and can be confirmed by other researchers.

Results

The results are presented by research question and themes. Quotes from the participants are presented to support the findings.

Research Question 1: College Experiences That Contributed to Completion

Research question 1 was "what community college experiences do recent Hispanic graduates perceive contributed to their degree completions?" The two themes related to RQ1 that emerged are sustained availability of faculty and advisors and staff and access to community college resources.

Sustained Availability of Faculty and Advisors and Staff

All 10 participants reported a connection to a faculty member, staff, or advisor who was instrumental in their persistence to completion. Advisors and admissions

representatives were some of the first people that the participants encountered. Carla formed a community college relationship with an advisor who guided and supported her during the completion of her associate degree. Carla said the advisor guided her where to go and what to do and,

when I was about to give up ... he's like, "nope you're not going nowhere." He guided me as to where to go ... It was always, no matter what, if it was anything that he could help with... even academically ... if I couldn't get a hold of a teacher ... he was there.

Nine out of the 10 participants described how the advisors assisted them with admissions and registration process. Each semester most of the advisors also helped with selecting classes. Pete said, "the advisor usually assisted with telling me which classes are better suited for me ... we worked back and forth until I pretty much selected the classes I wanted." And Robert described his experience with the advisors saying, "the advisors there were wonderful, they explained the different pathways." Isabel's advisor assisted when she was having trouble in one of her classes due to lack of teacher feedback and said, "so I had to go talk to my advisor to change my class because I wasn't learning anything."

Advisors were instrumental in all of the participants' experiences in community college, but the early college high school participants' experiences were slightly different. The four early college high school students had community college advisors come to the high school and provide guidance. Barbara, an early college high school

graduate, had an advisor at CCSUS who was very helpful and said, “I could email her anytime time or even text anytime and she was always very helpful.”

Participants described forming relationships with faculty by interacting with the faculty members during and after class. Frank said, “they encouraged us to stay after to talk to them and asking questions.” And Steve said, “getting to know your teacher, being active in the classroom really does help because it makes the teacher more ... willing to work with you.” Chris, whose interest is creative writing, formed a relationship with a writing teacher saying, “he really did help boost my confidence in writing. Especially like in getting ideas together ... We debated a lot ... but it really helped me solidify my ideas of what I believe in.” Some faculty also served as advisors providing guidance in coursework, internships, references, and encouraging participants to continue their education. David said he developed a very good relationship with a faculty member, “he was very knowledgeable. So, every time I had a question about which class to take next, is this class going to be useful for my job, he would always answer it.” David also developed a relationship with the department chair who he asked advice regarding an interview. Isabel also had a similar connection with a faculty member and said, “he would motivate me, he would help me. I still keep in contact with him, I tried to make a resume because I wanted to start applying for jobs and he helped me out.” Robert formed connections with several faculty and said, “they were very interested in their students ... Not only were they just interested in teaching you the subject ... they really wanted to develop ... your well roundedness and becoming a professional.” Robert formed a

relationship with one of the faculty members and said, “one professor in particular, I ended up taking six classes with her. She’s written numerous recommendations for me.”

Participants also described relationships with others at the community college that provided encouragement to persist. Lucy formed a connection with a receptionist at CCSUS in a department that served to provide resources and information to students and began working in the same office. The receptionist was knowledgeable about the community college system and was able to answer Lucy’s questions or help Lucy find other people with the answers to the questions. Through the connection Lucy said, “it had a big impact on my success because they [the people in the department] do a very good job on giving out resources for students.” Robert was able to intern with a U.S. senator through connections made at the community college and said, “so that opened up even more interest or, you know, motivation that I feel like I’m diversifying myself.”

Access to Community College Resources

All 10 participants used at least one type of academic resources available at CCSUS. The resources included the library, computer lab, and tutoring; participants experienced support through study groups and peers. The academic resource that most participants referred to was the computer lab with eight out of the 10 participants using this resource. Many of the participants reported a lack of resources at home. As David said, “I used the computer lab because there was a point, I didn’t have a lot of money, so I didn’t have a computer to do my schoolwork.” And Lucy said, “I think the most helpful was the open computer lab because there was a time, I didn’t have a computer that was

compatible for a program.” The computer lab provided resources not only with respect to computers, printers, and software but also support from computer lab aides who assisted with the use of technology. Carla, who was very new to technology, said about the computer lab tutor, “he guided me step by step. He never judged me. He never underestimated me.”

Seven out of the 10 participants found peers and study groups as useful resources and support. Many of the participants formed study groups to prepare for tests and others worked with peers as part of a group project. Robert said, “I actually learned a lot from them [group projects] ... Those experiences helped me a lot of how to be a team player, how to work in a group, how to communicate effectively with everyone.” Carla described herself as fortunate to work on a group project with students who were willing to accommodate her schedule. Carla, who worked 3 days a week and went to school 2 days a week, said, “they knew my circumstances and we would do it on Saturday mornings. And I felt so bad because they’re young kids waking up on Saturday morning.” Other participants described fellow students who could provide guidance by advising on which classes to take and other questions associated with higher education.

Research Question 2: Outside Experiences That Contributed to Completion

RQ2 was “what experiences outside the community college do Hispanic recent graduates perceive contributed to their degree completions?” The four themes related to RQ2 that emerged are: value of education, family, intrinsic motivation and organization, and networking.

Value of Education

All 10 participants indicated a better life, in general, and opening up career opportunities as to what pushed them to complete higher education. Pete, who retired from military service, “wanted to pursue a second career and ... it would benefit me more if I were to have a college degree ... more options as far as my selection of what I wanted to do as a second career.” Even though David had previously attempted but flunked out of college, he pursued community college after completing his military obligation. David was then hired as a civil servant and while working in civil service was encouraged by his co-workers to complete community college and was told, “without a degree you’re never going to get out of entry-level work.” Robert said about his education goal, “Just the desire to better myself. I wanted to learn, have a new skill set ... Also trying to find a career or better job.”

Carla, who works as a substitute teacher, entered community college when she was in her 40s. Carla’s desire to have a career prompted her to enroll in college and she said, “getting an education was the best thing because no other job was going to be worth it.” Carla’s co-workers encouraged her to continue her education because, as Carla said, “I got doors opened to me with an associate and now they’re telling me ‘if you only had your bachelor’s you could be the teacher’ ... So, I’m like, you know what, I’m not staying here, I’m going up there.”

Family

The family theme incorporates support from the family including emotional and financial support. Family was also defined as encouragement, through various means, to complete higher education. All 10 participants described some family aspect as an experience that contributed to their degree completions. All 10 participants described the encouragement from family members to enroll and complete community college. It was Lucy's grandparents who influenced her decision to enroll in community college:

They came from Mexico and always told me that education was power. As well as I'm speaking two languages because I was able to speak up in Spanish and English. So, they always told me that my education was key to success and through education I could become whoever I wanted to become.

Barbara described the encouragement from her parents saying, a lot of what pushes me is my parents ... it's like they're putting in the effort to have me here in the U.S. because I wasn't born in the U.S., but I was actually raised in Mexico for the biggest part of my life. So, for me, it's just the effort that they put in to have me here.

Isabel's parents' challenging educational experiences were her motivation and influenced her to enroll in community college. Isabel said,

My dad didn't even graduate, from not even high school; he got his GED. And I saw how he struggled ... they wanted me to have a better life. My mom did enroll

in college, but she got pregnant with me and then she had to stop going and I just wanted to keep going, get my degree, being educated.

Frank said his parents were by his side and helped him pursue his education. They challenged him to be better than them. Robert said of his parents, “they were always supportive of whatever I did. My parents had the notion that we want you to do better than us.” David, the participant who works in civil services, described his family’s modest emotional support saying, “Mostly like ‘way to go mijo’, that’s it. My family’s support, you know Mexican families, once you get out of the house, you’re really not their responsibility anymore.”

Two of the participants, Lucy and Frank, included celebrating family members’ graduations as a motivating factor. Frank said, “My mom was the first to graduate, but she wasn’t the last for sure. I can remember from a young age going to all their [family members] graduation ceremonies. And being there, of course, just made me want to strive harder of finish too.” Lucy said,

I do have a cousin who graduated from college and I would always see them and go their graduation, see them in their cap and gown and see them get degrees. So, that would get me pretty excited ... And I want to get an even higher degree than them. I want to get my PhD.

Six of the 10 participants reported they received emotional support from their family, six reported they received financial support from their family, and three participants had both emotional and financial support. The six participants who reported

receiving financial support lived at home; that was one means of financial support.

Barbara, one of the early college high school graduates, said,

I think I'm in a good situation like being able to ... have a roof over my head and food, right? and not having to worry about it and focus on schooling. So, I think financially, that has been definitely been a lot of help. And it helps me focus.

Lucy indicated she received financial support in the form of room, board, and gas money from her family but did not receive emotional support and said, "But emotional support, I think that I had to deal with all that myself because I wouldn't really share with them how it was."

Intrinsic Motivation and Organization

All of the participants described some form of intrinsic motivation. Throughout Robert's secondary education he was placed in special education and was told he could not be successful in college and if he did go to college, he would need to take a reduced course load. Robert's desire to succeed allowed him to overcome his previous stigma and said, "when I got to college, I found out that I can do this. I just need to find that little bit of my own way." Frank's motivation moved from extrinsic to intrinsic and described it saying, "we just honestly stopped competing with each other [friends] and we started competing with [others at] the school." Barbara said, "it was just like me getting exhausted from schoolwork ... and being like okay, you did this last year, you can do this again."

Carla's self-efficacy increased when she became a motivational influence for other students. Carla said,

You know what, I could say there was like two or three students who were about to drop out, very young, getting out of high school, intelligent, smart kids. And I actually I talked to them. I gave them an example like my life, my situation. And I told him you know what, you guys don't have any obstacles, it's just you. Then I talked to them and they decide they, they're there, they graduated with me, when they graduated and they thanked me that day. They told me, 'you know what, we were about to drop out.' And they kept on. So I was, I was really happy for them; they're young kids, you know, and now they have their associate.

Lucy was at a point in her community college experience where she reported she had developed a belief that she could succeed, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation.

Lucy, who was a student at the early college high school, began taking classes at one of the satellite campuses. As Lucy was completing her associate degree, she took a class at a different campus. She described her experience:

It was my first time there, the first time I asked for help, and it seemed kind of like, I don't know. It just made me feel like I was in trouble because I went and asked for help and instead of helping me out they kind of like yelled at me and they just told me to take a map. And that's when I really felt on my own.

When probed as to how Lucy overcame this interaction she responded,

Well, I said to myself, you're able to solve math problems, you're able to solve many things that other students can't, so you can find a building, you can do it and plus I also didn't want to disappoint my parents and tell them ... I'm dropping one of my classes ... because I know that my parents would have been "you work this hard to get where you are so that a building defeats you?"

As Lucy's self-efficacy increased, she reported she was able to reach out and assist other students. Lucy described an encounter with a new student saying,

There was a student who was, she had, she came from Mexico and she was lost, she didn't know what to do but she wanted to do something for herself ... So, I told her, "why don't you join these classes first [in Adult Education] and then once you get your GED and you're more fluent in English, you can go ahead and join the community college" ... I think she also felt comfortable because I spoke Spanish, and when she entered the office and she was looking for help, well, I think it's helpful when you say like, I can help you and I can speak Spanish, in Spanish, and she became even more friendly and she was open to so many questions.

Five of the participants described organizational skills as a necessity in becoming self-reliant and successful. Pete, who has a job and a family said, "you gotta make sure you have time to study, time to work, and give them [family] time too ... begin able to manage my time to get everything completed." Carla said, "I had to manage my time and it was very tight for me to work around everything, doing my homework, studying at my

own pace, going to work.” And Barbara said, “being organized from the beginning of the semester has really helped me ... when I started being a little more organized ... and at the end of the semester it was a little more relaxing.”

Networking

Participants described a variety of networking interactions that were part of the motivation for them to complete community college. Eight out of the 10 participants described some sort of interaction that provided encouragement and incentive. David found that he could rely on his co-workers, who had already completed their degrees, for homework help. David said,

I could do my homework [at work] as long as I’m not letting any systems die or any servers die ... then I had a network team there on site that I could just say, “Hey, I’m stuck on this, can you help me?”

Steven met an author at a job fair who gave him very good advice and said, “you should write constantly, write and throw as many ideas out so you can see which one sticks then work on that one specifically.”

Isabel described her church youth group as part of her network. The members in the group had already been through college and offered help if needed. Isabel said, “one of them graduated in accounting so I would ask her for help when I took accounting classes.” Robert, whose father is a pastor, was also a member of a church youth group. Robert networked with other young people who were attending universities in different parts of the country. Robert was able to meet a professor with a PhD in psychology

saying, “it was really inspiring.” Robert also met a bio engineering professor and a practicing emergency physician, and these interactions led Robert to say, “there’s a lot of individuals in our organization that I got to meet over the years and they’ve definitely inspired me.”

Summary

Sustained availability of faculty, advisors, and staff and access to community college resources were college experiences participants perceived contributed to their degree completions. Relationships were formed primarily with advisors and faculty. The relationships provided the participants with someone they could go to for assistance and guidance. The participants were able to rely on the faculty, advisors, and staff to answer questions, guide them through the higher education process, and assist with their coursework. Participants described access to community college resources as an essential component and all the participants used at least one aspect of the resources available from group work and study groups, to tutoring and computer labs.

Participants perceived the value of education, family, intrinsic motivation and organization, and networking as experiences outside the community college that contributed to their degree completions. Participants described the benefits of completing college and the value it adds for more career options, better job, promotion, and also to better one’s self. Family provided support, both emotional and financial, encouraging and motivating the participants. All 10 participants described how family impressed upon them the importance of education and many participants felt as if it was a family

obligation to graduate. As most of the participants continued their education motivation moved from extrinsic to intrinsic. As part of intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy, participants understood the need to be organized in order to deal with responsibilities efficiently. Networking was an important part of experiences outside of the community college. For some participants, their co-workers described the importance of earning a degree and were willing to assist participants with coursework. Networking with individuals who had already achieved their higher education goals provided an incentive for participants to complete their aspirations.

In Chapter 5, I interpret the findings in the context of the conceptual framework, Tinto's theory of student departure, as well as related empirical research. I describe the limitations of the study and make recommendations for further research. I describe the potential impact for positive social change. And, finally, I provide concluding remarks that capture the key essence of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to determine Hispanic graduates' perspectives on experiences contributing to successful community college degree completion. I used a basic qualitative study design to gather data, with an interview process where I asked straightforward questions to uncover participants' experiences. Previous research studies focused on student retention in the first year rather than retention to completion, and the majority of studies did not gather data directly from the students but rather institutional data. This study focused on gathering data directly from Hispanic students who completed an associate degree at a community college. I used two research questions to guide the interview process:

RQ1: What community college experiences do Hispanic recent graduates perceive contributed to their degree completions?

RQ2: What experiences outside the community college do Hispanic recent graduates perceive contributed to their degree completions?

The results of this study led to two findings for RQ1 and four findings for RQ2. The community college experiences that recent Hispanic graduate students perceived contributed to their degree completions, in response to RQ1, were sustained availability of faculty and advisors and staff and access to community college resources. The four findings that emerged from RQ2 regarding the experiences outside the community college that recent Hispanic graduate students perceived contributed to their degree

completions were the value of education, family, intrinsic motivation and organization, and networking.

Interpretation of the Findings

The interpretation of the six findings of this study describes in what ways the findings confirm, disconfirm, or extend the knowledge in the discipline by comparing them with what has been found in the peer-reviewed literature and conceptual framework. I begin with the peer-reviewed literature comparison.

Interpretation of the Findings in Light of Empirical Research

I begin the interpretation of the findings by analyzing the findings in light of empirical research, by confirming, disconfirming, or extending knowledge of the discipline. I compare the findings in my research with what has been found in peer-review literature described in Chapter 2.

Sustained Availability of Faculty and Advisors and Staff

All 10 participants described sustained availability of faculty and advisors and staff as an experience that they perceived assisted with their completions. Relationships were formed with advisors and faculty and staff who provided guidance and encouragement. Roksa and Whitley's (2017) research study found that students became engaged in their studies when the students had a perception of faculty taking an interest in their learning and development. Mertes' (2015) research also found that students felt a sense of belonging when faculty showed concern for them, as students, and took a general interest in them and their overall development.

Carla's and David's experiences support the findings of Roksa and Whitley (2017) and Mertes (2015). Carla described her advisor as the one who kept her on track and would not let her give up. Isabel's advisor guided and assisted her through her associate degree, helping Isabel change classes when a faculty member did not communicate with Isabel in a timely manner. The advisor assisted Isabel through the associate degree progress with recommendations on coursework and faculty members that would take an interest in her learning. David's computer technology faculty member provided guidance with his coursework, helped him find internships, and wrote references for him. The faculty member showed interest in David's success and provided the support needed. Lucy found support and a resource with an administrative assistant who worked with minority students, advising them of resources. The administrative assistant provided guidance and Lucy became a peer resource herself as she wanted to assist others in the same manner that the administrative assistant had helped her.

Carales (2020) found that advising impacted Hispanic community college students' degree completion; the advising was to be developed matching the programs and students. Museus et al. (2016) reported that cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness contributed to community college mentorship. Rodriguez et al. (2016) reported that Hispanic male students did look for a faculty member who could understand their culture and community. Ponjuan and Hernandez (2016) reported that Hispanic students found Hispanic faculty more approachable and supportive as well as more engaging in the classroom and Hispanic male students looked to Hispanic faculty as role

models. When I followed up with an additional interview question asking the participants if the community college personnel with whom they had developed a relationship were of Hispanic ethnicity, all participants indicated “yes,” corroborating Museus et al.’s findings. Rodriguez et al. reported that Hispanic male students did not want to “lose” their machismo or feel dumb or inferior by seeking support from faculty members. Although the participants did reference others who would avoid seeking help, I did not find the Hispanic male participants’ expressing a reluctance to seek support.

Access to Community College Resources

All 10 participants valued access to community college resources and used the library, computer lab, and tutoring. The participants also described the value of study groups and peer support. Covarrubias et al. (2018) and Blackwell and Pinder (2014) described the importance of social support through peer-to-peer relationships. The relationships are an important factor in forming a sense of belonging which, in turn, assists in student retention. Covarrubias et al. described the peer interaction as a way to gain confidence in completing a degree as students were able to discuss aspirations with other students who had similar goals. Barbara described a fellow classmate who was a year ahead in college and assisted Barbara by tutoring her when she asked. Pete was among the three participants who considered tutoring a resource that contributed to his success.

Tovar’s (2015) study indicated that support programs had a small but significant effect on students’ success; further, an even smaller contributor was interaction with

faculty outside the classroom. The findings in my research study disconfirm Tovar's findings as all participants described both support programs and faculty as instrumental in their degree completion. Students who acknowledge their academic weaknesses have persisted with the aid of academic support (Covarrubias et al., 2018). There are additional ways for students to gain the skills needed to succeed. Students who understood they were academically underprepared began to enhance their studies and foundational knowledge through their love of reading (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). During the interview process, the participants did not discuss how a love of reading enhanced their studies, but Lucy did disclose how reading the lesson before attending class enhanced her ability to process the information taught in class. Not only did Lucy read the lessons before class, but she would also read her notes to study for quizzes and exams. All 10 participants used community college resources, but the interviews revealed the human factor, tutors who were nonjudgmental and willing to assist, as an important piece along with the resources.

Value of Education

All 10 participants acknowledged the value of education and described the value in different ways. All participants described the need for education for more career options or a job promotion, and a few of the participants even described the benefits of college to improve one's self, to improve their life, and to provide the ability for social change, upward mobility. Pete, who retired from the military, wanted to pursue a second career and indicated that doing so required a college education. Dave, who works in civil

service, wanted to be promoted. His co-workers informed him that he would only be promoted if he earned a degree. Pina-Watson et al. (2015) and Blackwell and Pinder (2014) both reported that students, particularly those with a low socioeconomic background, were motivated to complete higher education to improve their socioeconomic status and find work in a field they enjoy. Blackwell and Pinder expanded their information reporting that students were willing to overcome stressful situations, such as working, in order to complete education with the goal of a better life.

Family

All 10 participants reported at least one form of family support varying from encouragement and financial and emotional support to guidance through the higher education process from family members who have experience with higher education. Frank and Lucy described an increase in motivation to complete higher education when they attended family graduation ceremonies. They both wanted the same sense of celebration and achievement. The positive family expectations and sharing college experiences with families that influenced college completion were reported by Kirk and Watt's (2018) research study and supported by participants' responses during the interviews. Pina-Watson et al. (2015) reported that family values and support are essential and are also strong motivational factors, and Tovar (2015) reported the most important support was provided by the family. Covarrubias et al. (2018), Goldsmith and Kurpius (2018), and Vega (2016) all reported that family support was a motivating factor in student success.

Early college high school participants, Steven and Barbara, both indicated family support in the form of emotional and financial were important to their successes. Eight of the participants lived with their parents while they attended community college. The participants indicated that they were provided room and board and had very little responsibility and expectations associated with the family home; this is the financial support most participants reported.

Goldsmith and Kurpius (2018) reported that students whose parents were Mexican immigrants were motivated by their parents, and their parents wanted a better, easier life for their children. Barbara and Lucy, whose parents are Mexican immigrants, described how part of their motivation to complete higher education was their parents, corroborating Goldsmith and Kurpius' study. Barbara and Lucy indicated that their parents wanted a better life for their children. Storlie et al. (2014) found that Hispanic students encountered barriers due to the complex role of familial relationships. One such role described by Storlie et al. was that female Hispanic students' responsibilities included assisting in the home and family life. However, the four female participants indicated that their responsibilities were higher education and not the family home.

Intrinsic Motivation and Organization

Six of the 10 participants described their motivation from the beginning of their education pathway, helping in their degree completion. Intrinsic motivation was already part of these six participants' determination to complete their degrees. For the remaining four participants, self-efficacy and motivation moved from extrinsic to intrinsic; notably,

three of the four were early college high school students. Intrinsic motivation has been cited as a criterion to degree completion by Karaman et al. (2018) and became evident when students began to take ownership of their academic success. Students' locus of control moves from extrinsic to intrinsic when they experience success and begin to understand that they, themselves, are in charge of their future, Karaman et al. reported. Blackwell and Pinder (2014), Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons (2015), Pina-Watson et al. (2015), and Vega (2016) all reported that students were able to overcome obstacles through determination and motivation and increased self-efficacy through success.

Carla had to overcome several obstacles; for example, there was a technology knowledge gap due to the long sit out between high school graduation and college, but it was through determination and motivation that Carla completed her degree. Robert began his higher education path with a stigma from high school; he was enrolled in special education throughout his public-school education. It was through his determination and motivation that Robert overcame the stigma and not only enrolled in community college but earned his associate degree. Robert took ownership of his academic success and did not allow anyone to tell him that he could not succeed. Five of the participants described personal organization as a necessity in becoming self-reliant and successful. Pete, who has a family, described the need for organization for family time, work, and studies. Carla also has a family, worked, and described the need to make time for her studies. She was able to organize and prioritize so that she successfully completed community college and is now enrolled in the bachelor's program.

Networking

Participants networked through church youth groups and fellow employees. The networking provided the participants with the opportunity to encounter graduates outside of their academic circle. Vega (2016) indicated the three support networks that are instrumental in student success are high school personnel, family, and friends who have higher education experience. I did not find networking described in other literature, but networking was a theme evidenced from the interviews.

Participants described friends as a good resource for knowledge and inspiration. Robert described his networking with other young people from across the country; he was able to network through his church youth group. Robert was inspired by the young people he met who earned graduate degrees in areas such as psychology, emergency room physician, and bioengineering. Isabel also networked with a church youth group. The members in the group had already been through college and offered help if needed. classes. David networked with his fellow employees who encouraged him to earn his degree. His colleagues supported David through assistance with homework he was able to do on the job.

Vega (2016) also reported that rigorous high school coursework provided foundation for success in higher education. One of the interview questions I asked was about the participant's academic preparedness. The responses varied from very prepared to not prepared at all. The findings in my research study did not confirm Vega's results. Pete described his academic preparedness on a scale from one to 10 as a zero but added

to the response by saying that everyone is ready to attend college, they just need to do it. Isabel thought college would be easier but pushed herself to study and do the work, reporting her notes and studying was what helped her complete. Both Carla and Pete did not attend college immediately after high school but said the important part of completing is be persistent and believe that you can do it.

Interpretation of the Findings in Light of Conceptual Framework

I used Tinto's conceptual framework for my research study. The foundation of Tinto's (1993, 2012, 2017) framework for student completion is based on self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and relevance and expectation. Tinto (2017) described self-efficacy as students' belief that they can succeed; self-efficacy increases when students experience success. Tinto (2012) indicated the importance of students feeling a sense of belonging in order to be retained and persist to completion. Relevance, Tinto (2017) said, is students' understanding that what they learn matters now, and in the future, and what they learned will be used while expectations refer to what is required of the students in terms of coursework and institutional requirements.

Sustained Availability of Faculty and Advisor and Staff

Tinto (2012) described factors that form a student's sense of belonging as engagement and interaction with faculty and other students. Faculty and advisors had a big impact on all 10 participants and the participants described positive interactions with community college personnel. Lucy described her interaction with an administrative assistant at her community college as very impactful to her academic career. The

administrative assistant informed Lucy of resources available to students. The impact was so great that Lucy shared the information with other students. David's interaction with the computer technology faculty positively impacted his success as the faculty members were available for assistance in computer labs and to provide references. Tinto (2012) found that students were more inclined to meet with faculty who were ethnically like them or understood their culture. Tinto's assertion is supported through the follow-up question asked of the participants; their campus relationship was with Hispanic personnel.

Tinto (2017) described expectation, a component of persistence, as information and guidance the students need to be successful, whether it is requirements to be admitted and registered or what is necessary to be successful in class. Tinto indicated institutional leaders must understand what types of guidance a student needs, what information the student is lacking, and provide the means for the student to be successful. When Pete sat down with an advisor, the longest part of the registration process was getting the transcripts from the previous institutions to CCSUS. Pete was provided clear expectations and knew his transfer credits would determine what courses he lacked for his degree. David's discussions with his faculty advisor provided a clear pathway to his degree with recommendations on what classes to register for in the coming semesters.

Access to Community College Resources

To circumvent academic failure and, in turn, support the increase of self-efficacy, Tinto (2017) recommended institutions implement front-loaded academic support to

develop students' success with tasks to increase self-efficacy. None of the participants indicated a front-loaded academic support system but they rather sought help as needed. The participants were informed of community college support by their faculty and used the resources as needed. Engagement with other students could take the form of group works in the classroom and student study groups, resulting in a sense of belonging.

Carla's interaction with fellow students was hesitant at first as she was older than the other students, she is in her 40s, and her technology skills were lacking. Carla described herself as fortunate because the students in her group work were willing to work with her schedule and agreed to meet on Saturday mornings. Carla's sense of belonging increased through the group work and student interaction and she was able to encourage students, who were thinking of dropping out, to persist. Lucy described her use of a computer lab because her computer was not compatible for the program she was to use. It was one of Lucy's professors who informed her of the computer lab. Isabel used the tutoring center for math and learned about the tutoring center from her professors.

Value of Education

Relevance, Tinto (2017) said, is students' understanding that what they learn will be used in future classes and in the workforce and through relevance will value education. David saw the relevance of his coursework since he was working as a civil servant in the computer technology area, but David did provide some insight into the coursework stating, "they don't see what's out in the real world. Like, we're still learning COBOL and some programming languages that are not being used in today's world."

Carla, whose goal is to become a teacher, works as a teacher's aide and sees the relevance of her coursework. She understands the need of and values education and is willing to work hard to achieve her goal of becoming an early childhood education teacher. Pete's desire to be a social worker, his second career, knew it would take a college degree to achieve his goal. He indicated with a college degree he would have more options for his second career.

Family

Tinto did not address family as a component of persistence. The focus of Tinto's studies was at residential institutions, primarily 4-year institutions and not community colleges. Tinto's focus was on actions institutions could take that would assist students in their degree completions and not necessarily on outside experiences that could assist students. Tinto (1993) discussed the obstacles some students encounter when leaving home and attending college, leaving their friends and family behind, and adapting to a new environment. The participating institution was a commuter institution; the participants did not have to leave family and friends behind.

All 10 of the participants described family support as an important aspect of their community college experience. The participants described a variety of family support facets, such as financial and emotional, and even attending other family members graduations. The participants' description of the importance of family was supported by peer-reviewed articles (Kirk & Watt, 2018; Pina-Watson et al., 2015; Vega, 2016) and

encouraging family participation in community college functions is a recommendation; particularly attending graduations as this was the event several participants mentioned.

Intrinsic Motivation and Organization

Enhancing the feeling of competence is critical in increasing self-efficacy; as a result, student retention and persistence to completion are more likely to occur (Tinto, 2017). As students succeed, their self-efficacy increases, stress is reduced, and the likelihood of retention and perseverance increases (Tinto, 2012). Persistence to completion hinges upon a students' ability to adapt to the new world of higher education and developing strategies to meet more challenging social and intellectual demands (Tinto, 2017).

The participants who described their successes and ability to achieve their goals were describing their increased self-efficacy. As the participants described their successes, they also described their intrinsic motivation, no longer needing others to commend their achievements. Frank described a time in middle school when he would compete, academically, with his friends but at some point, as a dual credit student, he and his friends began competing with other students at school, to do the best they could do, resulting in intrinsic motivation. Robert described his self-efficacy increasing when he began academically succeeding; he believed he could succeed. Robert's motivation moved from extrinsic to intrinsic, wanting to succeed for himself. Participants, such as Pete, who returned to college to complete a degree had intrinsic motivation. Their prior experiences had provided their self-efficacy, the belief they could succeed, from the

beginning of their community college journey and intrinsic motivation as they succeeded through their academic journey.

Networking

Tinto (1993) researched common reasons students provided for leaving college: adjustment, academic difficulty, incongruence, and isolation. Adjustment refers to students' ability to adapt to the new world of higher education (Tinto, 1993). The adjustments that students need to make are forming new peer groups and developing strategies to meet more challenging social and intellectual demands (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's focus was on challenges institutions can overcome to increase students' completions and not on external factors. Eight out of 10 participants described an outside interaction, networking, as providing encouragement and incentive; a strategy to meet challenging social and intellectual demands (Tinto, 1993). Robert, through his church youth group, interacted with a variety of high achieving people who inspired and encouraged him to complete his education. Robert also had an internship with a U.S. senator and that networking motivated him to continue his education, two examples of forming new peer groups. David networked with his co-workers who would assist him with his homework and encouraged him to continue his education, developing a new strategy to meet intellectual demands.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations of this qualitative study. All of the participants in this study were from one community college. Although there are two main campuses and

two satellites, all of the participants attended the same main campus for at least one class. A larger cross-section of community colleges may result in different findings. All participants self-selected to enroll in the study and were successful college students. The perspectives may differ if students were not successful and were randomly selected.

Another limitation of the study is that CCSUS is an HSI with 73% of the students and 35% of the faculty self-identifying as Hispanic. The larger Hispanic population may provide students with the ability to engage with faculty and peers of the same ethnicity or who understand their culture; a non-HSI may not understand the Hispanic culture nor employ Hispanic faculty and staff. Another limitation is that the number of males who responded to the interview request was unexpectedly high, six males and four females; CCSUS' student population is 44% male and 56% female. An unexpected limitation was the number of participants who were early college high school students. The early college high school students did not necessarily have the same experiences as regular community college or even dual credit students. Early college high school students did not have to leave the high school campus and most of the interaction with community college personnel occurred at the high school. There was not an integration of early college high school students with community college students: the early college high school students stayed on their campuses, taking classes in their early college high school environment. Early college high school students interacted with each other and not dual credit nor community college students, a limitation in their experiences. An additional limitation is that all of interviews were conducted virtually due to the COVID pandemic. Not all

participants used the video component of Zoom making it difficult to gauge responses and asks additional questions to gain more information.

Recommendations

One recommendation for future research is to exempt early college high school and dual credit students from the interview process. These students have different experiences from community college students who have to go through the admissions and registration process with little help or assistance. Notably, the structures in place for enrolling early college high school and dual credit students limit those students' responsibilities for even the most basic of processes.

Another recommendation is to focus on the experiences within the community college, in particular the engagement with community college faculty and staff. The focus on engagement, with the lens on similar ethnicities and engagement between Hispanic students and faculty and staff, would be informative to institutions who are HSIs. All of the participants indicated their community college relationship was with a faculty or staff member of Hispanic ethnicity. Further study into this phenomenon would assist in determining if the Hispanic factor is a critical aspect of degree completion.

Implications

The results of the study may have implications in providing insight into how community colleges can provide structures that lead to degree completion for Hispanic students. Participants in this research study reported that one of the reasons for earning a degree is for a better life through a better career and job opportunities. All of the

participants described sustained availability of faculty and advisors and staff as an important community college experience; each participant formed a relationship with at least one community college employee. Participants also described access to community college resources as experiences associated with successful degree completions. Access to computer labs with computer tutors, tutoring, peer relationships, and study groups were described as positive factors while attending community college. Community colleges should be aware of the community college resources that provide an experience that can lead to degree completion. Access to material resources is important but, as the participants said, the tutors and peers are also important. By providing the academic foundation that community college students may need to be successful and achieve their higher education goals, positive social change can occur through degree attainment.

The participants also provided insight into experiences outside the community college that contributed to successful degree completion. Family motivated the participants to complete and graduation ceremonies were mentioned as a motivating factor. Community colleges can encourage family attendance at graduation ceremonies and touring the campus and meeting the faculty and staff with whom family members will interact. Another insight provided by the participants was intrinsic motivation. Tinto (2017) described students motivation moving from extrinsic to intrinsic through student successes. Community college personnel can provide a path toward academic success, such as through peer groups and classroom interaction where the students can experience success and the transition from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation begins.

This study provides clear implication for social change through an increase in Hispanic higher education completion with a potential increase in socioeconomic status, improved financial and job stability, and better career opportunities. All participants acknowledged the reasons for earning their associate degree was to benefit themselves, both intrinsically and career-wise. The graduates understood without a degree, employment opportunities and promotions would be limited. And by completing their degrees, the participants reported they bettered themselves and their lives.

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative research study was to determine Hispanic graduates' perspectives on experiences contributing to successful community college degree completion. The overwhelming response by the participants was the support from community college personnel. The support was essential in creating a sense of belonging; people the students knew could provide guidance and support throughout their academic careers. Community college personnel provided assistance in the form of advising, which classes to enroll in, references for jobs, scholarships, and internships, and encouragement, not allowing the students to quit. Participants also described access to community college resources and, more importantly, the people associated with the academic resources as a factor in their degree completions. The people associated with community college resources included tutors, both in tutoring centers and computer labs, study groups, and peers.

Participants described the value of education as a motivating factor in completing community college. The participants said the way to better one's self and better their life is through degree completion. Family was important in supporting the participants, both financially and emotionally. Graduation ceremonies for family members was another motivating factor as the participants described the desire for the same celebration.

Participants also described intrinsic motivation as a factor in completing; the participants wanted to achieve their goal of degree completion. In order for participants to complete their degrees, organization was necessary. By setting a schedule of studying, working, and meeting other obligations, the participants were able to complete their degrees. And, finally, networking outside of the community college provided interaction with others who had completed their degrees. The networking presented the participants with a view of what can be accomplished with degree completion and encouragement to complete.

The interview process allowed the voice of the students to be heard, describing what they perceived to be effective and to contribute to their degree completions. Patterns emerged from similar experiences described by the participants. Along with community college engagement and support, the majority of participants reported family encouragement as a key contributor to success. Attending family graduations, family emotional and financial support, and encouragement were all described as an important part of the graduates' experiences. By making community college personnel aware of the experiences that the participants indicated contributed to successfully degree completion, there can be an increase in Hispanic degree attainment.

I am implementing the findings of my research study both in the community college and in my personal life. I meet with students as part of their math placement process. Not only do I place them in math courses but I converse with them to determine their goals and what the best pathway to success is. At the end of our conversation, I now provide the students with a folder to begin organizing their paperwork and give them my business card. I also let them know I am available for questions and concerns and they may call or email me any time.

My great niece is graduating from high school and would like to enter the health care field. I advised her to find someone at the institute who she could go to with questions. I described the participant, Robert, who was in special education while attending public school and was always told what he couldn't do. Robert then decided what he could do. My great niece was inspired and said, "I'm in special education, too." This is social change – helping students achieve their goals.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Welcome, and thank you for volunteering to provide information about your experiences in community college. I am interested in understanding what experiences Hispanic students attribute to their degree completions. Because I am a Hispanic graduate, I am interested in understanding other Hispanic graduates' experiences. I know the importance of higher education and, I want to encourage others to complete. Through the information you and other participants provide, my goal is to identify what can assist Hispanic students to persist and complete their higher education goal.

As a participant in this interview, I assure you that your information will remain confidential so the data that you provide will not be attached to you. Responses will not include personal identifiers such as the participant's name. During the interview process, please let me know immediately if you feel uncomfortable with a particular question and prefer not to provide feedback.

RQ #1: What community college experiences do Hispanic students perceive supported their degree completions?

Gather basic demographics:

Age range: 18–21 22–24 25–34 35–49 50–64 65+

Gender: Major:

1. Let's begin with your story. What motivated you to enroll in college?
2. Think back to when you decided to enroll in college and describe your experience with entering college. For example:

- a. How did you manage all the steps for admissions?
 - b. How did you manage all the steps for registration?
 - c. Who assisted you with the throughout the process? How did these people continue to assist you throughout your community college experience?
 - d. Who helped you overcome any obstacles and how did they help? (list)
3. Once you entered college, what was the experience like for you?
- a. Was there a faculty or staff member who helped you or that you went to with questions?
 - b. How did they assist you? (if assisted)
 - c. How did this person continue to assist you throughout your community college experience (if at all)—or was it a momentary assistance?
 - d. Was there anyone else who provided assistance?
4. Tell me about any students or groups of community college peers with whom you interacted and how they might have assisted with your persistence. For example: student clubs such as Latinos for Education and Achievement, Christian Challenge Club, and so on.
5. I'd like for you to think about "academic resources" – things like the library, tutoring, computer labs, faculty office hours, or even fellow students. Which of these were most helpful for you?
6. Describe any mentorship relationship that was developed through the use the academic resources.

7. Tell me what motivated you to complete community college.

RQ #2: What experiences outside the community college do Hispanic students believe contributed to their degree completions?

Now, I'd like to turn to some questions that speak to others, outside the community college, who may have provided support and contributed to your success.

1. Would you tell me about your background such as:
 - a. What experiences do your family, friends, or other people have with higher education?
 - b. Did anyone from high school encourage you to attend college?
2. Describe how well you were academically prepared for college.
3. What type of support did you receive from your family? Financial? Emotional?
4. Describe any family obligations or expectations that may have occurred as you were completing your education, such as working while attending college, etc.
 - a. How did you overcome any obligations?
5. Describe any organization or events that influenced or motivated you to complete college.
6. When you reflect over your community college experiences and any difficulties you encountered
 - a. What were your concerns?
 - b. How did you address them?
 - c. What kind of support did you receive? Who provided the support?

Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Thank you again for participating in my research study. I will follow up with a transcription so you can review the information for accuracy. Please verify your email address. As a token of my appreciation, I will mail the \$25 gift certificate.